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SALAR
DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈھ روزنامہ بنگلور

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QUOTE of THE DAY

"There are no potholes (in Bengaluru). There is no issue. It is only a creation on social media. Bengaluru is doing well. People from all over the world are coming to invest in Bengaluru, to live in Bengaluru, to work in Bengaluru

—DK SHIVAKUMAR,
Deputy Chief Minister

97 lakh voters deleted from Tamil Nadu after SIR

70 lakh names dropped from Gujarat as EC publishes draft rolls

AHMEDABAD, 19 DEC

A total of 97.4 lakh voters have been removed from the Tamil Nadu voter list, following the enumeration phase of the SIR exercise and the state's electoral roll now has 5.43 crore voters, Chief Electoral Officer Archana Patnaik said on Friday. Meanwhile, nearly 70 lakh names were dropped from Gujarat's voter list.

As of 27 October, 2025, the pre-SIR electoral roll had 6.41 crore voters, she said.

The number of male voters stood at 2.77 crore, while the number of female voters is 2.66 crore. The total number of third gender voters stands at 7,191, while the number of differently abled voters stands at 4.19 lakh.

"Based on the visits made by BLOs and BLAs, errors like permanently shifted voters, absentee voters, deaths and those who were enrolled at multiple places were identified. Their details have not been included in the draft voter list," Patnaik said at the Secretariat.

BLOs and BLAs assess the activities, scrutinising the newly published SIR list at Ganabhaban, in Kolkata on Tuesday **PHOTO: ANI**

She said deceased voters stood at 26.94 lakh, while permanently shifted or absentee voters were at 66.44 lakh. Those who have enrolled at multiple places were at 3.39 lakh, while 12,000 individuals reportedly did not wish to be enrolled during the SIR campaign, she said.

Asked which Assembly constituency has the highest number of voter removals, she said Sholinganallur, Pallavaram and Alandur.

In Chennai, the draft SIR list showed 14.25 lakh voters removed, with the electorate declining from 40.04 lakh to 25.79 lakh.

In Coimbatore, 6.50 lakh voters were dropped from the draft electoral list. Dindigul district saw 2.34 lakh deletions.

Noting that the claims and objection period has commenced by the Election department, she said, "Those whose names could not be found or for newcomers, they can apply for inclusion through Form 6. There is Form 7 for claims and objections, and Form 8 for a change in address. "

Meanwhile, the names of nearly 74 lakh voters have been dropped from Gujarat's draft electoral rolls after SIR, pegging the total count of electors at 4.34 crore as against the 5.08 crore earlier.

A total of 73.73 lakh voters were removed from the electoral rolls after the exercise initiated, state CEO Hareet Shukla said. —*PTI*

Vehicles stuck in a traffic jam as a layer of smog engulfs New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

Parliament ends without discussion on deadly pollution

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Winter Session of the Parliament ended without any discussion on air pollution, as smog chocked New Delhi and parts of North India.

However, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju blamed the Opposition for "stalling" the debate in Parliament.

"We were fully ready for the debate on pollution," Rijiju said. "But Congress encouraged others to stage protests (on VB-G RAM G bill) in the Well of the House. They threw papers, paper planes and stood atop desks and stalled the proceedings. I want to tell the opposition that they won't get votes through such tactics. Only good works will get them votes," he said.

Notably, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had raised the issue and called for a debate on air pollution earlier in the proceedings. The discussion was to be initiated by Priyanka Gandhi, but it never took place.

During the 15 sittings of the Winter Session, the House took up several politically-charged debates – including son 150 years of Vande Matram and election reforms.

Crucial bills passed during the short session include Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill which allows the privatisation of nuclear energy and the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB-G RAM G Bill, which replaced MGNREGA. —*PTI*

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"VB-G RAM G Bill is anti-state and anti-village. We saw what MGNREGA meant during Covid. When the economy shut down and livelihoods collapsed, it kept crores from falling into hunger and debt. the Modi government demolished 20 years of MGNREGA in one day

Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader

Hijab row: Doctor to resume duty in Bihar

PATNA, 19 DEC

Amid speculation that AYUSH doctor Nusrat Parveen declined a government position after Chief Minister Nitish Kumar removed her naqab (veil) during a ceremony, officials confirm she will report for duty. Dr Mahfoozur Rahman, Principal of the Government Tibbi College and Hospital, stated, "I spoke to Parveen's husband, relatives and her classmates. They told me that she would join duty on 20 December." The incident, which has generated widespread criticism and a political uproar, occurred when Kumar, upon seeing Parveen's naqab, exclaimed, "what is this" before removing it. The Bihar government has faced allegations of undermining Muslim traditions, while Minister Dilip Jaiswal argued that the controversy is unfounded. Additionally, a threat against the CM related to the incident has prompted a police investigation. —*PTI*

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'Accused in Goa nightclub fire case fled to UK'

PANAJI, 19 DEC

Pradeep Ghadi Amonkar, the original owner of the land where the fire-ravaged nightclub in North Goa stood, alleged on Friday that "some big guys" are shielding Surinder Kumar Khosla, one of the accused. Amonkar claimed police allowed Khosla, a British national, to escape to the UK following the 6 December blaze at 'Birch by Romeo Lane', which claimed 25 lives. Amonkar is embroiled in a legal battle to reclaim the land. Despite being the "prime accused," Khosla managed to flee, according to Amonkar, who has filed a public interest litigation seeking accountability for the tragedy. Khosla, he said, was "very much in Goa" during the incident. —*PTI*

Chennai bans Pitbull, Rottweiler from 20 December

CHENNAI, 19 DEC

The Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) has banned new pet licences for Pitbull and Rottweiler breeds of dogs within its limits. The ban would come into effect on 20 December.

A penalty of Rs 1 lakh will be imposed on persons who purchase or rear Pitbulls or Rottweilers without a licence after the cut-off date.

The move comes after several recent cases of attacks by Pitbulls and Rottweilers.

The owners of Pitbulls and Rottweilers, who have valid licences, have been directed to compulsorily use leashes and muzzles when taking their pets outside. Owners who fail to comply with this condition will be fined Rs 5,000.

The GCC has also placed a resolution before the council proposing a fine of Rs 1 lakh on individuals who illegally purchase or breed Pit Bulls and Rottweilers without a licence.

In an incident in August, a seven-year-old girl was attacked by her house owner's Pitbull, leaving her with severe facial injuries requiring medical treatment.

In another incident, a 55-year-old man was mauled to death by his neighbour's Pitbull while returning home from work. —*Agencies*

Riots break out in Bangladesh

DHAKA, 19 DEC

Riots broke out in parts of as the body of a prominent July Uprising leader, who died in Singapore six days after he was shot, reached the capital.

Various parts of the country were rocked Thursday night by attacks and vandalism, including stone-hurling at the Assistant Indian High Commissioner's residence in Chattogram, after Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus confirmed that July Uprising leader Sharif Osman Hadi's death.

There were, however, no reports of fresh violence since Friday morning.

Hadi, one of the leaders who had taken part in the student-led protests last year - July Uprising - and a candidate for the scheduled 12 February general elections, died while undergoing treatment at a Singapore hospital. His body arrived at 6 pm.

Yunus has declared a one-day state mourning on Saturday.

Bangladesh daily newspaper Prothom Alo office was set on fire by angry protesters, in Dhaka, Bangladesh **PHOTO: PTI**

A Hindu man was lynched to death and his body set on fire over alleged blasphemy in Mymensingh city. —*PTI*

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CM and I have reached an understanding: DKS on power tussle

KARWAR, 19 DEC

- Amid the alleged power tussle, Shivakumar said he reached an agreement with Siddaramaiah with the party High Command's intervention. CM asserted that there was no power sharing agreement

Deputy CM DK Shivakumar on Friday said that he and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah have come to an agreement on the power sharing tussle. He said that the Congress High Command was involved in the agreement.

Siddaramaiah, earlier in the day, had affirmed that he would remain in office for his full five-year term.

Shivakumar told press in Karwar "I had never said he (Siddaramaiah) will not be there (as CM) for five years. I have never said that the High Command is not with him. As the High Command is with him, he is Chief Minister today."

"Both of us have come to an agreement, the High Command has got us to an understanding, as per that both of us have discussed and have said several times that we will abide by it and go ahead," he said.

The Deputy CM was on a visit to various temples in the Uttara Kannada district on Friday.

Shivakumar did not link his visit to a temple in Uttara Kannada to the power tussle. —*Salar News*

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DyCM DK Shivakumar performs pooja at Mahabaleshwara temple in Gokarna, Friday **PHOTO: SALAR**

NO CONCLUSIVE LINK BETWEEN AQI & LUNG AILMENTS: GOVT

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The government has told Parliament that no conclusive data establishes a direct link between higher air quality index (AQI) levels and lung diseases.

In a written reply in the Rajya Sabha on Thursday, Union Minister of State for Environment Kirti Vardhan Singh acknowledged that air pollution is a triggering factor for respiratory ailments.

Singh responded to BJP MP Laxmikant Bajpayee, who cited studies showing prolonged exposure to hazardous AQI in Delhi-NCR leads to lung fibrosis, reduced lung elasticity, COPD, and other ailments.

Singh highlighted government initiatives, including training modules for programme managers, medical officers, ASHA workers, and vulnerable populations. IEC materials on pollution-related illnesses have been developed in multiple languages. The National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCCHH) also produces customised awareness materials.

However, experts caution that official data may understate pollution-related health impacts, as death certificates rarely list pollution as the cause, even when lung diseases result from prolonged exposure, suggesting official figures may not reflect the truth. —*PTI*

B'luru doc molested on her way to PG

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

An unidentified man allegedly molested a 28-year-old doctor while she was returning from hospital duty, Soladevanahalli police said on Friday. The incident occurred in the late hours of 16 December, extending into the early hours of 17 December in AGB Layout.

According to police, the woman was returning to her paying guest (PG) accommodation after completing her duty at a hospital at around midnight when an unknown person approached her on a white scooter and stopped nearby. He allegedly enquired about the location of a bus stop before getting down from the vehicle. The man allegedly behaved indecently with the woman by touching her inappropriately. When she raised an alarm for help, the accused fled on his scooter.

The victim lodged her complaint on 17 December, and a case was registered at Soladevanahalli police station under Section 74 (assault or criminal force to a woman with intent to outrage her modesty) of the BNS . Efforts are underway to identify and arrest the suspect. —*PTI*

'MENTALLY UNSTABLE'

Man kicks 5-year-old in public in B'luru

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

A five-year-old boy was injured after he was allegedly kicked by a neighbour in Thyagarajanagar on 14 December. The boy, identified as Neev Jain, was playing badminton with other children when the man approached him from behind and kicked him to the ground. The incident was captured on CCTV. The accused was arrested and later released, a senior police officer said.

The boy's mother, Deepika Jain, stated in her complaint that she was visiting her elder brother Manoj's home when the incident occurred. CCTV footage shows the boy playing with other children near the house at around 1.10 pm, when a neighbour is seen approaching him, taking a few steps forward, and suddenly sprinting to kick the child to the ground without any provocation. Neev reportedly sustained bleeding above the eyebrow and abrasions on his hands and legs from the fall.

Police said a preliminary inquiry revealed that the accused neighbour, identified as Ranjan, is suffering from a mental health disorder and is undergoing treatment.

A case has been registered under Section 115(2) (voluntarily causing hurt) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. —*PTI*

A man, reportedly mentally unstable, kicks a boy who was playing on the street in Thyagarajanagar, Bengaluru on Friday **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

- CCTV footage shows the boy playing with other children near the house when the accused suddenly sprints from behind and kicks him without any provocation

DKS' Secretary, driver injured in car accident

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister Shivakumar's Personal Secretary Rajendra Prasad and his driver were injured when their vehicle hit a bike killing the biker on the spot in Savadatti taluk on Thursday. Prasad was returning to Belagavi when the mishap occurred. He sustained minor injuries below the neck and his driver on his chest. Belagavi Superintendent of Police Bhimashankar Guled said the car hit the bike as it had suddenly entered the road. Both Prasad and the driver are out of danger. Meanwhile, Shivakumar said in Belagavi on Friday that doctors had examined Prasad and there was no cause for concern. Expressing grief over the death of 31-year-old Manjunath Bairanatti in the accident, he said he would ask ministers to visit the family. *— Salar News*

Search ops intensify in prisons to curb contraband

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

DGP (Prisons) Alok Kumar on Friday said search operations against contraband inside prisons across the state have been intensified, leading to a number of seizures. In the last 36 hours, mobile phones and SIM cards have been recovered following search operations inside prisons, including Kalaburagi, Mangaluru and Shivamogga. "10 mobile phones, four SIM cards at Kalaburagi, six phones at Mangaluru, four phones at Ballari, three phones and four SIM cards seized at Shivamogga prisons. This drive will continue," he said on X. He further said that in the largest haul in the history of Parappana Agrahara prison in Bengaluru, 30 mobile phones were seized in a late Thursday night operation. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Nat'l Herald: DKS to appear before cops next week

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said that he will appear before the Delhi Police next week in connection with its probe into the National Herald case. The Delhi Police had issued a notice to Shivakumar, who is also the state Congress chief, seeking financial and transaction details. "I had told them, I will come next week after the legislature session," Shivakumar said on Friday. The notice issued by the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) states that Shivakumar is "believed to have vital information" regarding the National Herald case registered on 3 October 2025 against Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. In the notice dated 29 November, the EOW asked Shivakumar to appear before it by 19 December. *—PTI*

2 brothers drown as boat capsizes in Honnavar

HONNAVAR, 19 DEC

Tragedy struck near Manki village in Honnavar taluk, Uttara Kannada district, as two brothers drowned after their fishing boat capsized in the Arabian Sea. The deceased have been identified as students Madan Narayan Kharvi, 17, and Sujan Narayan Kharvi, 15. On Thursday evening at around 6.30pm, the brothers had gone out fishing in a small traditional boat. About 100 metres from the Manki Madi shore, strong waves overturned the vessel, causing the brothers to fall into the sea. Reports suggest they were unable to resurface due to the intensity of the waves. Both were residents of the Devaragadde area of Manki village. A case has been registered at Manki police station. *— Salar News*

Council passes anti-hate speech bill amid protests

Bill passed on voice note amid chaos as Priyank attacks Shah

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

The Legislative Council on Friday passed a bill to curb hate speech, amid strong protest from Opposition BJP and JD(S), which called it "draconian", "direct attack on free speech" and "dangerous tool for political vendetta".

The Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill, piloted by Home Minister G Parameshwara, was put to vote, amid protests from Opposition members from the well of the House. The Bill was passed in the Legislative Assembly on Thursday, amid opposition from BJP and JD(S) members.

The Opposition demanded that the Bill be withdrawn, alleging that the proposed legislation will lead to "police state", and "undeclared emergency", where even criticism can be considered as hate speech.

Parameshwara said that the Bill proposes a jail term of one year, extendable up to seven with a fine of Rs 50,000 for a hate crime. For repeated offences, the maximum imprisonment will be seven years, with a fine of Rs 1 lakh. He noted that there was an increase in communal and hate speeches. Offences will be considered non-bailable.

Home Minister G Parameshwar speaks on the last day of the Winter Session in the Council at Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in Belagavi on Friday PHOTO: SALAR

"The Bill is not to control anyone or out of political malice; it applies to everyone. It is being brought with an intention to protect the health of the society and to maintain peace," he said. Rejecting BJP's allegations, he said that, similar law has been brought in Maharashtra by the BJP government. The Bill was put to vote as Opposition members trooped into the well of the House, demanding an apology from Minister Priyank Kharge for making a remark against Union Home Minister Amit Shah, during the discussion. Priyank had called Shah an "nalayak (unfit/incompetent) Home Minister".

As the chaos prevailed with ruling party members standing up in support of Priyank Kharge, the Chairman put the Bill to vote and it was passed with a voice vote.

Leader of opposition Chalavadi Narayanaswamy said, the Bill when passed into a law will be used to file "false cases" against political opponents. Shobha Karandlaje urged the Governor to withhold assent to Karnataka hate speech bill *—PTI*

'BELONGS TO FAMILY'

KBG denies land grab allegations in Assembly

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

- BJP claimed Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda grabbed 21 acres originally recorded as a lake and burial ground, demanding his resignation and an inquiry

Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda on Friday rejected allegations that he encroached upon government land in Garudanapalya village, Kolar taluk, asserting that his family's ownership was legally established decades ago.

Making a voluntary statement in the Karnataka Assembly, Gowda addressed accusations made by the BJP on Wednesday. The Opposition BJP claimed Gowda grabbed 21 acres originally recorded as a lake and burial ground, demanding his resignation and an inquiry. "Many attempts are made to trap those who work sincerely. There is no need to be disturbed by such attempts," he told the House.

Tracing the history, Gowda stated the village originally belonged to the Mysore royal family, who purchased it in 1923. In 1953, the Maharaja's secretary leased the land to Gowda's grandfather, Chowdegowda. Though the land was sold to CM Habibulla Khan in 1959, Chowdegowda challenged the order before the Mysore Appellate Tribunal. A settlement was reached where Khan transferred ownership of the entire 256-acre village to Chowdegowda, as recorded in the sale deed.

Regarding claims of encroaching on tank land, he stated that while two tanks exist on the property, the land is registered in his family's name. He said that not an inch of the tanks or channels has been encroached upon, inviting inspection of the site. *—PTI*

There was no power-sharing deal: CM

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah asserted that there was never any power-sharing agreement with his Deputy DK Shivakumar. Shivakumar echoed the claim, but added that the two had come to an understanding.

Asserting that he would remain in office for his full five-year term "if the High Command lets me", Siddaramaiah informed the Assembly on Friday that "I never said that I will be the Chief Minister for two-and-half years" as the Opposition raked up the leadership change issue.

"I feel that the High Command is on my side, but I will abide by the High Command's decision," he said.

BJP MLA Sunil Kumar said, "We want you to fulfill all the promises you made here for the North Karnataka region. You have to make it clear whether you will be the Chief Minister in future as well."

"I will remain the Chief Minister in future as well," Siddaramaiah replied.

He also reminded the saffron party leaders that their stalwart leader BS Yediyurappa had promised a full term, but had to step down.

Meanwhile, Siddaramaiah, along with a group of Ministers and legislators, attended a dinner hosted by senior Minister Satish Jarkiholi in Belagavi on 18 December, official sources said.

The dinner meeting held at Jarkiholi's residence. Jarkiholi, who is considered close to Siddaramaiah, has sparked fresh speculations about the power tussle by hosting the dinner meets.

The attendees included Ministers G Parameshwara, HC Mahadevappa, BZ Zameer Ahmed Khan, MC Sudhakar, and legislators AS Ponnanna, Naseer Ahmed, sources said. All of them are considered close to Siddaramaiah.

Responding to a question from reporters, regarding the dinner meet, Deputy CM D K Shivakumar asked, "What's wrong in meeting for dinner? Let them have dinner, it's a good thing. Can we say don't have dinner?"

Jarkiholi reiterated that there was nothing new about the dinners. "It will keep happening in the future too."

Asked about Shivakumar not being invited for the dinner, he said, "he will also be invited." *—PTI*

POCSO court finds Belagavi seer guilty of abduction, rape

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

A special POCSO court in Belagavi on Friday found a Hindu religious seer guilty of abducting and raping a minor girl after luring her into his car on the pretext of dropping her home and stated that the sentence would be pronounced on Saturday.

The accused has been identified as Hathayogi Lokeshwar Mahaswami 30, a resident of Mekhali village in Raybag taluk.

According to the prosecution, the accused on 13 May, 2025, asked the minor girl to accompany him in his car on pretext of dropping her home. He then abducted her and travelled via Mahalingpur to Bagalkot, and from there to Mantralayam in Andhra Pradesh. On 14 May, he booked a room at a lodge in Mantralayam and forcibly sexually assaulted the girl.

He again returned to Bagalkot district on 16 May, booked another lodge room, and committed sexual assault there as well. He later dropped the girl at the Mahalingpur bus stand threatening to kill her if she disclosed the incident.

Sub-Inspector Raju from Mudalagi police station in Belagavi registered the case, while Inspector Srishail Byakod conducted the investigation and submitted the chargesheet to the Additional District and Sessions Court and Special Fast Track POCSO Court–01, Belagavi.

Judge CM Pushpalatha, hearing the case found Sri Hathayogi Lokeshwar Mahaswami guilty and adjourned the verdict to 20 December. *—Salar News*

Valmiki case: ED attaches Rs 8 crore assets of Congress leader Nagendra

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Enforcement Directorate on Friday said it has attached assets worth around Rs 8 crore of Congress leader B Nagendra in the Valmiki scam linked to money laundering. Nagendra is a former minister of Karnataka.

The attached properties include four residential and commerical lands and a building. The action was taken as per the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), the Enforcement Directorate (ED) said in a statement.

The Enforcement Directorate called these assets "proceeds of crime" as per the PMLA.

The "remaining proceeds of crime could not be traced and it appears that it has been either exhausted or concealed by B Nagendra," the Enforcement Directorate statement said.

B Nagendra PHOTO: PTI

"Therefore, the Enforcement Directorate is forced to attach proceeds of crime of equivalent value, which otherwise may frustrate further proceedings under PMLA," it said.

The provisionally-attached properties are valued at Rs 8.07 crore.

The money laundering case stems from an FIR of the Karnataka Police and the Central Bureau of Investigation, which alleged that funds worth crores were diverted from the accounts of the Karnataka Maharshi Valmiki ST Development Corporation (KMVSTDC) and sent to "fake accounts" and later laundered.

Nagendra, a former tribal affairs minister in Karnataka, was arrested by the ED in this case and was later released on bail. *—PTI*

NO ANTICIPATORY BAIL FOR MLA BASAVARAJ IN MURDER CASE

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

The Karnataka High Court on Friday rejected the anticipatory bail plea of BJP MLA Byrathi Basavaraj in connection with the murder of a rowdy sheeter.

The case pertains to the murder of Shivaprakash alias Biklu Shivu, who was hacked to death at Bharathi Nagar in the city in July this year.

During the investigation, the police began probing the alleged role of Basavaraj in the crime, who has been named as the fifth accused in the FIR.

The MLA approached the High Court seeking anticipatory bail. Justice Sunil Dutt Yadav heard the petition and declined his plea and directed him to approach the trial court with an appropriate application. Significantly, the High Court also refused to grant any interim protection from arrest, thereby clearing the way for the investigating agencies to summon or arrest the MLA as part of the probe.

The court offered limited relief by clarifying that provisions of Karnataka Control of Organised Crime Act (KOCA) would not apply. *—PTI*

CHRISTMAS READY

Children of Sneha Deepa Trust for Disabled dress up as Santa Claus at Kannada Bhavan in Bengaluru on Friday. The event was organised by Art Cultural Educational Enlight Foundation PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

KERALA BUS BURSTS INTO FLAME; DRIVER SAVES THE DAY

MYSURU, 19 DEC

A Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus was gutted near Hosahalli Gate on the outskirts of Nanjangud on Friday, but fortunately, all 44 passengers escaped unharmed.

The bus was en route from Bengaluru to Kozhikode via Mysuru when the driver's saw thick smoke emanating from beneath the vehicle. He alerted the passengers to evacuate. "Both the bus conductor and driver acted swiftly, waking up sleeping passengers," an eyewitness said.

Many lost valuables, including passports and phones. Passengers were later provided with an alternative KSRTC bus to continue their journey. Probe is on. *—Salar News*

'ABUSE OF FREE SPEECH'

SC bins B'luru man's plea to quash FIR for post against PM

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

- Gurudath Shetty, 24, had challenged the FIR for reposting content alleging that the PM lacked remorse or repentance for people he had abused. SC said he had 'brazenly abused the fundamental right of free speech'

The Supreme Court on Friday refused to quash an FIR against a Bengaluru resident for a social media post critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, holding that the petitioner had "brazenly abused" the right to free speech.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi dismissed the plea filed by Gurudath Shetty, 24, who had challenged the FIR for reposting content alleging that the PM lacked remorse or repentance for people he had abused.

"The petitioner has brazenly abused the fundamental right of free speech and expression. We cannot extend any discretion or relief at this stage," the bench said, while granting liberty to Shetty to approach the jurisdictional high court for appropriate remedies.

The court also refused to grant interim protection, rejecting a request for a five-to-seven-day reprieve. "There is no question of protection," the Chief Justice said.

Shetty has been booked for cognisable and bailable offences under Sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. His counsel submitted that Shetty was willing to tender an unconditional apology and claimed he was not the author of the post but had merely reposted it with a question mark.

The Chief Justice, however, observed that Shetty had shown no remorse or repentance. The FIR alleges that the post was intended to tarnish the PM's reputation.

In his petition, Shetty claimed Gujarat Police personnel visited his Bengaluru residence on November 10 without a warrant, took him away and later served him a notice under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita to appear before investigators. *—PTI*

Modi to visit Bengal and Assam

KOLKATA/GUWAHATI, 19 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit West Bengal on 20 December and Assam from 20 to 21 December. In West Bengal, Modi will address a rally in Taherpur in Nadia district, a Matua-dominated area, amid heightened political tension over the ongoing SIR exercise in the state. For the Matuas, a Dalit Hindu community that migrated from Bangladesh due to religious persecution, SIR has revived anxieties over identity and documentation. Modi will inaugurate national highway projects worth about Rs 3,200 crore. Later, he is expected to visit the newly constructed 'Swahid Smarak Kshetra', built in memory of 860 martyrs of the Assam movement against illegal infiltration, and pay tributes by lighting a lamp. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

UP CM links cough syrup scam to SP

LUCKNOW, 19 DEC

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has alleged that individuals arrested in connection with an illegal codeine-based cough syrup supply scam have ties to the Samajwadi Party. "Everyone knows that every 'mafia' group has ties with the Samajwadi Party," He claimed during a press briefing ahead of UP assembly's Winter session. While the Legislative Assembly may not conduct business due to the recent death of an MLA, Yogi stated that the government would address inquiries concerning the issue in the legislative council and outside the House. In response, SP President Akhilesh Yadav accused BJP government of shielding those implicated in the alleged racket, claiming it originated in UP and targeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi. *—PTI*

Cash-for-query: HC block Lokpal order against Moitra

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Delhi High Court has blocked the CBI from filing a chargesheet against TMC MP Mahua Moitra in the alleged cash-for-query scam. The HC set aside the previous Lokpal order and requested Lokpal to accord consideration for grant of sanction under Section 20 of the Lokpal & Lokayuktas Act. The 'cash-for-query' scandal involves allegations that Moitra took money and gifts from a businessman in return for asking questions in Parliament Moitra sought to restrain the CBI from taking any steps in furtherance of the sanction ord during the pendency of HC proceedings. The agency has registered an FIR under the Prevention of Corruption Act on a reference from the Lokpal. *—PTI*

1 Naxal shot dead, 41 Maoists surrender

BIJAPUR, 19 DEC

Security forces in central India have delivered major blows to the banned CPI (Maoist) group through both lethal encounters and mass surrenders. In Bijapur district, Chhattisgarh, a gunfight broke out on Friday in the forests of Aadwada-Kotmeta during an anti-Naxalite operation by the District Reserve Guard. One Naxalite, Fagnu Madvi, 35, a Bhairamgarh area committee member with a reward of Rs 5 lakh, was killed. Authorities recovered a .303 rifle, 9mm pistol, explosives, radios, scanners, medical kits, and Maoist materials. So far in 2025, 285 Naxalites have been killed in the state, mostly in Bastar. Meanwhile, in Telangana, 41 underground Maoist cadres, including six senior functionaries, surrendered to the police, handing over 24 firearms and 733 rounds of ammunition. *—PTI*

PM has acute acronym-itis: Cong on G RAM G

Oppn MPs demand the bill be sent to a parliamentary committee for further scrutiny

NEW DELHI/CHENNAI/ CHANDIGARH, 19 DEC

A day after Parliament passed the VB-G RAM G Bill that seeks to replace the 20-year-old MGNREGA, the Congress on Friday took a swipe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi saying he is suffering from a "case of acute acronym-itis".

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh posted on X a cartoon representation on X which read: "All new A.C.R.O.N.Y.M MANT RALAYA - Administrative Commission for Renaming Old Schemes -- New Yet Meaningless".

"The PM is suffering from a case of acute acronym-itis," Ramesh said in his post accompanying the cartoon.

His dig came a day after the passage of two bills in Parliament with catchy acronyms -- Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill and the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill.

Meanwhile, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday accused the Modi government of demolishing 20 years of MGNREGA in a single day, and dubbed the new VB-G RAM G legislation as "anti-village".

In a separate but related development, Opposition MPs on Thursday demanded that the VB-G RAM G Bill be sent to a parliamentary committee for further scrutiny, as they slammed the government over the Bill. Participating in the debate on the VB-G RAM G Bill, Congress MP Digvijaya Singh said he could not understand why the name of the Act was being changed.

Additionally, the TMC MPs held an overnight dharna in the Parliament complex, spending the night at the gate of the Samvidhan Sadan, with banners and portraits of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, slamming the government over the Bill, which replaces the UPA-era MGNREGA.

Furthermore, the Secular Progressive Alliance led by the ruling DMK, has announced a state-wide protest on 24 December against the Centre's newly passed legislation to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Additionally, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, in a post on Friday, said the state government will convene a special Assembly session on the issue in the second week of January. *—PTI*

Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, along with other leaders during a protest against the VB-G RAM G Bill that seeks to replace the existing MGNREGA, at the Winter session of Parliament, in New Delhi, on Friday *PHOTO: PTI*

> They (BJP) are changing all names that have any connection with Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi or anything related to Gandhi. They are Nathuram Godse worshippers and want Gandhi's name erased from everything
>
> -Pawan Khera, Cong spokesperson

> I feel the relevance of our Parliament is gradually declining. There are fewer sittings now and people thing nothing happens there. This is extremely dangerous for democracy, because the real issues are not discussed
>
> -Kapil Sibal, Rajya Sabha member

MODI, PRIYANKA HAVE CHAI TIME

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra shared a cordial conversation at the customary tea meeting hosted by LS Speaker Om Birla on Friday after the Winter Session ended. Sources said Gandhi told Modi she was learning Malayalam to better connect with Wayanad constituents & asked about his recent foreign tour. PM remarked on Ethiopia's social & economic progress. The interaction included light exchanges among leaders, who thanked Birla for conducting the session, which recorded 111 per cent productivity. *—PTI*

Bihar Union Minister's video triggers 'vote theft' row

- The video, which seems to have been shot in Manjhi's Lok Sabha constituency of Gaya, has been shared by the opposition RJD-Congress combine as "proof of vote chori" by the NDA.

PATNA, 19 DEC

A row has erupted in Bihar over a video in which Union Minister **Jitan Ram Manjhi** has purportedly spoken of having "helped" a candidate who was trailing in an Assembly election.

The video, which seems to have been shot in Manjhi's Lok Sabha constituency of Gaya, has been shared by the opposition RJD-Congress combine as "proof of vote chori" by the NDA.

Manjhi, however, said the video was tampered with and shared on social media.

The former Bihar chief minister, who heads the Hindustani Awam Morcha, can be heard speaking of an incident involving the Tikari Assembly constituency, which his party's candidate Anil Kumar had won in 2020, but lost to RJD in the Assembly polls held last month.

Speaking in the local dialect Magahi, the octogenarian can be heard saying, "The candidate was trailing by 2,700 votes in the 2020 Assembly polls. He called me, and I telephoned the official concerned. Finally, he was declared the winner."

"This time he lost by 1,600 votes. But instead of contacting me, he chose to concede defeat. The then DM of Gaya telephoned me to enquire what went wrong this time. I could have done nothing when the candidate went home without contacting me," Manjhi can be heard saying in the video.

The RJD, which may have wrested Tikari but suffered a crash to only 25 seats from 75 five years ago, shared the video on its X handle, claiming it as "the truth of the popularity of Prime Minister Modi." *—PTI*

Trump's defence bill boosts ties with India

NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

US President **Donald Trump** has signed into law an annual defence policy bill that highlights broadening US engagement with India, including through the Quad to advance the shared objective of a free and open Indo-Pacific region and address the challenge posed by China.

The National Defence Authorisation Act for Fiscal 2026, signed into law Thursday, also states that the Secretary of State shall establish and maintain within the US-India Strategic Security Dialogue a joint consultative mechanism with the Indian government in connection with Nuclear Liability Rules.

It authorises appropriations for the Department of War (DoW), the Department of Energy's national security programmes, the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, the Intelligence Community, and other executive departments and agencies.

"The Act will enable the DoW to carry out my 'Peace Through Strength' agenda, protect US from domestic and foreign threats, and strengthen the defence industrial base, while eliminating funding for wasteful programmes that undermine the fighting ethos of our nation's men and women in uniform," Trump said in a statement.

The Act outlines 'Sense of Congress on Defence Alliances and Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.' *—PTI*

Kokate granted bail in cheating & forgery case

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

The Bombay High Court on Friday granted bail to NCP leader and former Maharashtra minister **Manikrao Kokate** in a cheating and forgery case related to a government housing scheme, while suspending his two-year prison sentence. However, the court refused to stay the conviction, observing that prima facie evidence indicated Kokate's involvement.

He was accused of securing a flat under an economically weaker section (EWS) housing scheme by submitting false affidavits about his income, despite being a prosperous farmer whose earnings exceeded the Rs 30,000 annual eligibility limit.

Justice RN Laddha noted Kokate had remained on bail throughout the trial and appeal. The court required him to deposit Rs 1 lakh as surety and admitted his revision petition against the session's court's conviction for hearing.

Kokate resigned from the Maharashtra cabinet, where he held the sports and youth affairs portfolio, following his conviction. His counsel cited a medical procedure—an angioplasty as a reason for the bail plea, which was opposed by the public prosecutor. *—PTI*

KERALA FM SLAMS CENTRE'S RS 5,900 CRORE CUT AHEAD OF POLL

T'PURAM, 19 DEC

Kerala Finance Minister KN Balagopal on Friday criticised the Centre's decision to slash Rs 5,900 crore from the state's borrowing limit in the final quarter of the current financial year, calling it "politically motivated and entirely unjust."

Balagopal said the state government was informed of the cut through a letter from the Centre on Wednesday night.

He described the move as a direct attack on Kerala's development and welfare programmes, particularly as it comes just three months before elections.

He also highlighted that the Centre has repeatedly denied Kerala its rightful share of taxes and is withdrawing from the employment guarantee scheme, removing Mahatma Gandhi's name from the programme and passing a large portion of the financial burden to the state.

Kerala will now need to spend over Rs 2,000 crore annually from its own funds to continue the scheme. *—PTI*

Cong told to remove PM-Adani video

AHMEDABAD, 19 DEC

A court in Ahmedabad has mandated the Congress party and four of its leaders to remove a deep fake video of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and industrialist Gautam Adani from all social media platforms. The order follows a civil defamation suit filed by Adani Enterprises Limited.

The Additional Civil Judge, Shrikant Sharma, directed the defendants, including Jairam Ramesh, Supriya Shrinate, Pawan Khera, and Uday Bhanu Chib, to take down the video within 48 hours of the ruling, which was issued on 19 December. The video, shared on the Congress party's X handle, featured a fabricated conversation between Modi and Adani, captioned "Modi-Adani Bhai Bhai, Desh Bechkar Khai Malai" (Modi and Adani are like brothers, selling off the country and enjoying the spoils).

If the video is not removed, X Corp and Google, named as respondents, must take it down within 72 hours. The court noted the video contained "prima facie defamatory statements" that could damage Adani's reputation, stating, "malicious publications intended to damage the plaintiff's reputation may cause irreversible harm." The next hearing is on 29 December. *—PTI*

NITISH'S HIJAB-PULLING ROW

Nitish's act sparks protest in Kolkata; Mufti seeks FIR

KOLKATA, 19 DEC

A large number of women staged a protest march in Kolkata on Thursday evening against Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for publicly removing the veil of a Muslim woman doctor during a government programme in Patna, calling the act an assault on women's dignity.

The march, from Park Circus to Gariahat in the Kolkata city, saw participation from women across communities. "What Nitish Kumar did was audacious and misogynist. The nation should protest," said Priyadarshini Hakim, daughter of Kolkata Mayor Firhad Hakim.

Protesters demanded an apology, asserting the issue concerned women's autonomy and constitutional values, not religion.

The incident occurred on Monday at an appointment letter distribution ceremony for Ayush doctors at the Bihar secretariat, where Kumar questioned the woman's attire and removed her 'naqab', triggering nationwide criticism.

Meanwhile, PDP leader Iltija Mufti filed a police complaint in Srinagar seeking an FIR against Kumar, alleging the act violated the dignity, autonomy and identity of Muslim women. She claimed that the incident had emboldened miscreants elsewhere and criticised political leaders for justifying the act instead of condemning the act.

Hurriyat Conference chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq also denounced the incident, calling it a "grave violation of personal dignity and moral boundaries". Addressing a Friday congregation, he said no authority grants the right to interfere with personal choice and demanded an unconditional apology from the Chief Minister. *—PTI*

PDP leader Iltija Mufti addresses media *PHOTO: PTI*

- Protesters demanded an apology, asserting the issue concerned women's autonomy and constitutional values, not religion.

Madras HC orders TN to notify SOPs for political rallies

CHENNAI, 19 DEC

The Madras High Court on Friday directed the Tamil Nadu government to notify Standard Operating Procedures for managing large political roadshows and rallies by 5 January, 2026, citing the Karur stampede that killed 41 people in September.

A bench of Chief Justice Manindra Mohan Shrivastava and Justice G Arul Murugan heard petitions, including one by actor Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam seeking relaxation of roadshow conditions, while others sought crowd-control norms.

The state has already submitted a draft SOP.

Meanwhile, TVK held its first public meeting after the tragedy at Erode, where a supporter fell unconscious and was hospitalised. Vijay thanked supporters, called public affection his "greatest driving force", and attacked the ruling DMK as an "evil force". *—Agencies*

The Odisha Assembly, on the concluding day of its Winter Session on 9 December *PHOTO: ANI*

After BJP, BJD wants hike in MLAs' salaries

BHUBANESWAR, 19 DEC

The BJD on Friday urged Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi to reconsider the proposed hike in salaries and allowances of lawmakers in the Assembly, a day after the ruling BJP MLAs made a similar request to the Leader of the House.

The Odisha Assembly, on the concluding day of its Winter Session on 9 December, passed four Bills that proposed to increase by three times the salaries of MLAs, the chief minister, ministers, the Speaker, the deputy Speaker and others. The Bills were passed unanimously with the support of the BJP, BJD and Congress although the lone CPI (M) Member remained absent from the House and opposed it. Opposition Chief whip Pramila Mallik said the request is being made respecting public sentiments.

Mallik also made it clear that BJD president Naveen Patnaik, who had earlier announced that he would forgo the hike, has asked the party not to go against public opinion. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Dunki case: Rs 4 cr cash, 313kg silver seized in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has seized Rs 4.62 crore in cash, 313kg of silver, and 6kg of gold bullion from a travel agent in Delhi during raids connected to an ongoing money laundering investigation into the illegal transportation of Indians to the US via the 'dunki' route. The raids spanned over a dozen locations across Delhi, Punjab, and Haryana, revealing incriminating chats and documentation related to the dubious operations. Travel agents allegedly lured individuals with promises of legal passage to the US, only to subject them to illegal and perilous journeys through South America and Mexico. The ED's investigation follows the deportation of 330 Indian nationals back to India from the US in February 2025.—*PTI*

Odisha man mows down grandmother over property issue

JAJPUR, 19 DEC

A 70-year-old woman, Kuli Sahoo, was allegedly mowed down by her 23-year-old grandson over a property dispute in Jajpur district of Odisha. The incident occurred on Thursday as the victim, returning from her daughter's house, was struck by her grandson's vehicle, leading to her immediate death on the scene. Villagers reported that Sahoo had a strained relationship with her son, prompting her to gift portions of her land to her daughter, which incited the conflict between them. The grandson fled the scene post-incident, while a police case has been registered based on her daughter's complaint.—*PTI*

Vizag-bound AI flight cancelled due to tech snag

VIJAYAWADA, 19 DEC

An Air India Express flight, headed for Visakhapatnam was cancelled at Gannavaram Airport due to a technical snag detected before take-off on the night of 18 December. Passengers included prominent figures such as former Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu. The issue was identified during taxiing, prompting the aircraft to return to the bay and subsequently cancel the flight. An Air India Express spokesperson confirmed that the safety of passengers is of paramount importance to them and stated that the engine issue was identified before the departure. Affected passengers were provided with hotel accommodations and given options for refunds and complimentary rescheduling.—*PTI*

SP leader claims house arrest, cops deny allegations

LUCKNOW, 19 DEC

Samajwadi Party (SP) Vice-President of the women's wing, Sumaiya Rana, has made an allegation that she is under house arrest, a claim the police has refuted. Rana, daughter of poet Munawwar Rana, approached the Kaiserbagh police on 16 December to file an FIR regarding alleged inappropriate acts by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Uttar Pradesh minister Sanjay Nishad, but no action has been taken so far. "I am under house arrest," Rana claimed, noting that a woman doctor affected by the situation had relocated to Kolkata. She further stated that the CCTV footage shows police stationed outside residence since Wednesday. The police, however, denied her allegations. The Assistant Commissioner of Police Ratnesh Singh asserted that there is no such action. Rana plans to escalate her complaint to the commissioner of police. —*PTI*

Fog blankets North India, IMD puts Delhi on 'red alert'

Zero visibility, flight cancellations, PUC check worsen issue

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

A thick blanket of dense fog stretching from Punjab to Bihar reduced visibility across large parts of the Indo-Gangetic plains on Friday morning, prompting the India Meteorological Department (IMD) to issue a red alert for Delhi and warn of disruptions to road, rail and air traffic.

Satellite imagery showed widespread fog over Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, northeast Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.

At 5.30am, visibility dropped to zero metres in several locations, including Agra, Bareilly, Gorakhpur, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Safdarjung, Gwalior and Bhagalpur.

The IMD cautioned that driving conditions would be hazardous, with a heightened risk of accidents and possible power line tripping.

Orange alerts were issued for multiple districts in Uttar Pradesh, parts of Punjab and Uttarakhand. Residents were advised to avoid unnecessary travel, use fog lights and monitor transport advisories.

In Delhi, dense fog severely impacted aviation, with 79 flights cancelled and over 230 delayed at the Indira Gandhi International Airport. Delhi International Airport Ltd said operations continued under CAT III conditions, though disruptions were unavoidable. The national capital also saw strict enforcement of anti-pollution measures under Stage IV of the Graded Response Action Plan. The Delhi government reported a noticeable drop in vehicular movement and increased compliance with Pollution Under Control (PUC) norms. On the first day of the 'No PUC, No Fuel' drive, nearly 2,800 vehicles were denied fuel, while 3,746 challans were issued. A total of 210 enforcement teams were deployed. The Air Quality Index remained 'very poor' at 377 on Friday afternoon.

People walk along the Yamuna river, partially covered in foam, at Okhla Barrage, in New Delhi, in winter morning amid dense fog **PHOTO: PTI**

Delhi Education Minister Ashish Sood announced that 10,000 classrooms in Delhi will be equipped with air purifiers in the first phase, citing long-term pollution control measures and criticised the previous AAP government's Odd-Even scheme for the bad air quality.

Fog conditions across states

Punjab and Haryana reported intensified cold and poor visibility, with Hoshiarpur recording 4.8°C. Dense fog and cold-day conditions persisted across Uttar Pradesh, where red and orange alerts were issued in around 40 districts. Jharkhand is likely to witness dense fog for four more days, with visibility dropping to 50–200 metres.

In Rajasthan, dense fog was observed in the north-east, with further fog and temperature fluctuations forecast due to an approaching western disturbance.

—*PTI*

VICTIM RAPED IN STN

SC questions UP, Centre on lawyer's custodial assault

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Supreme Court on Friday sought responses from the Centre, the Uttar Pradesh government and other authorities on a plea filed by a woman advocate alleging illegal detention and custodial sexual assault at a police station in Noida.

A bench of Justices Vikram Nath and NV Anjaria directed the Gautam Buddha Nagar police commissioner to ensure that CCTV footage from the Sector 126 police station for the relevant period is preserved, sealed and not deleted or destroyed.

The petitioner alleged she was subjected to 14 hours of illegal detention, custodial sexual assault, torture and coercion by police personnel on the night of 3 December while performing her professional duties for a client. Senior advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for her, described the incident as a "very gross case", stating that the lawyer was "sexually mauled" and unlawfully detained.

The bench observed it would ordinarily have directed the petitioner to approach the jurisdictional high court but decided to entertain the plea due to the seriousness of the allegations and claims that CCTV cameras were deliberately disabled. The court issued notice, returnable on 7 January.

Addressing concerns about the petitioner's safety, the bench assured protection. Singh also urged seizure of CCTV equipment.

The plea claimed police personnel placed a government pistol on the petitioner's neck, forced her to disclose her mobile phone password and threatened her with a fake encounter. It further alleged deliberate non-registration of an FIR and protection of the accused officers.

The petitioner sought directions for immediate FIR registration and a probe by a Special Investigation Team or the CBI. — *PTI*

KOCHI OFFICER SUSPENDED FOR ASSAULTING PREGNANT WOMAN

KOCHI, 19 DEC

An Alappuzha-based station house officer was suspended on Friday after CCTV footage showed him allegedly assaulting a pregnant woman at a Kochi police station last year.

Prathap Chandran KJ, now SHO of Aroor police station, was suspended on the directions of State Police Chief Ravada Chandrasekhar after visuals from 20 June, 2024, surfaced. Kochi resident Shymol NJ alleged Chandran, then SHO of Ernakulam North police station, slapped her after her husband Benjo was taken into custody. The footage shows Chandran pushing and slapping her, while a woman constable is also seen striking her.

Shymol said she would pursue legal action until Chandran is dismissed and has sought a judicial probe before an Ernakulam court. The matter will be heard next month.

Fresh allegations have emerged, including from Kakkanad resident Rineesh, who claimed Chandran assaulted him in 2023. The Congress announced protests, with KC Venugopal blaming the CM for deteriorating policing in the state. — *PTI*

Three face suspension after children test HIV+ in MP

BHOPAL, 19 DEC

The Madhya Pradesh government has suspended the in-charge of a blood bank and two laboratory technicians after six children tested HIV positive following suspected contaminated blood transfusions at government hospitals in Satna district, an official said.

The action, taken on Thursday, followed a preliminary report submitted by a committee constituted by the Public Health and Family Welfare Department on 16 December to probe the incident.

Those suspended are blood bank in-charge Dr Devendra Patel and lab technicians Ram Bhai Tripathi and Nandlal Pandey. A show-cause notice has also been issued to Manoj Shukla, former civil surgeon of the district hospital, seeking a written explanation. Officials warned that strict departmental action would follow if the reply is found unsatisfactory.

The six affected children, aged between 12 and 15, were found HIV positive after receiving blood transfusions at district hospitals in Satna and Jabalpur between January and May. The parents of one child have also tested positive. Officials said all the children are undergoing treatment as per prescribed HIV management protocols, while further probe is underway to establish accountability and prevent recurrence. —*PTI*

- The six affected children, aged between 12 and 15, were found HIV+ after receiving blood at district hospitals in Satna, Jabalpur

Over 500 Chennai nurses detained after hunger strike

CHENNAI, 19 DEC

Over 550 nurses were detained after a hunger strike seeking jobs and benefits, police said on Friday. They were taken into custody on Thursday night for refusing to disperse, but released at Kelambakkam bus terminus Friday, where the protest resumed.

Organised by the Tamil Nadu Nurses Development Association, the stir involved nearly 600 Medical Services Recruitment Board nurses appointed in 2015 on consolidated pay, with assurances of regularisation after two years. They accused the DMK government of reneging on poll promises, demanding regularisation, maternity leave and equal pay. —*PTI*

Zubeen case: Singapore cops rule out foul play

SINGAPORE/GUWAHATI, 19 DEC

Probe into the death of singer Zubeen Garg in Singapore are continuing, with police there saying they do not suspect any foul play so far, even as a Special Investigation Team in India has filed murder charges in the case. The Singapore Police Force said the probe is being conducted under the Singapore Coroners Act, 2010, and that findings will be submitted to the State Coroner. A Coroner's Inquiry, a fact-finding process to determine the cause and circumstances of death, is scheduled for January and February 2026. Police urged the public not to speculate or circulate unverified information.

Garg died on 19 September while swimming in the sea during a visit to Singapore, where he was scheduled to perform.

Meanwhile, the SIT probing the case in Assam has moved the Crime Branch against Independent MLA Akhil Gogoi for allegedly circulating "unverified" charge sheet documents on social media. Officials said such circulation was illegal and could mislead the public. The SIT has charged seven people, including Garg's secretary Siddhartha Sharma and festival organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, with murder. —*PTI*

Sabarimala gold loss row: Two more arrested

T'PURAM, 19 DEC

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing the Sabarimala gold loss case on Friday arrested two more persons, taking the total accused to nine.

Pankaj Bhandari, Chief Executive Officer of Chennai-based Smart Creations, and Ballari jeweller Govardhan were taken into custody and questioned at the Crime Branch office in Thiruvananthapuram.

Police said gold removed from the Dwarapalaka idol plates and Sreekovil door-frames during electroplating in 2019 was handed to Govardhan by prime accused Unnikrishnan Potty.

More than 400 grams of gold were recovered from Govardhan's shop.

Both men were formally arraigned and will be produced before the Vigilance Court in Kollam.

Meanwhile, the Enforcement Directorate will register a case under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act after the Kollam Vigilance Court allowed it to obtain SIT records, including FIRs, remand reports and statements.

The ED's preliminary investigation found the alleged proceeds of crime remained with Potty and others. Kerala High Court is seized. —*PTI*

Leopard strays into Thane's society, injures 4

THANE, 19 DEC

Four people were injured after a leopard strayed into a residential complex in Bhayandar, Thane district, on Friday morning, triggering panic among locals. The animal was tranquilised and captured after a seven-hour operation, officials said.

"A leopard entered a densely-populated area along Talav Road and attacked passersby before entering the 'Parijat' building," an official said. Mira Bhayandar Municipal Commissioner Radhabinod Aribam Sharma added, "At around 1.50pm, we managed to tranquilise it, and by 2.55pm, it was taken away by the forest department."

Viral videos showed the leopard moving through narrow spaces and on staircases. The injured were rushed to nearby hospitals and are stable. Navghar police, Bhayandar fire brigade, and teams from the Thane forest department and Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) secured the area and cornered the animal inside a first-floor flat.

Pawan Sharma of RAWW said rescue teams were on standby throughout. The leopard will be shifted to SGNP's Leopard Rescue Center in Borivali for medical examination and rehabilitation. State transport minister Pratap Sarnaik called the incident concerning and urged high-resolution cameras and rapid response mechanisms to stop future incidents. —*PTI*

- The leopard will be shifted to SGNP's Leopard Rescue Center in Borivali for medical examination and rehabilitation

CYBER FRAUD SUSPECTED

Maharashtra village with 1.5K population logs 27,398 births

NAGPUR, 19 DEC

A village with a population of just 1,500 in Maharashtra's Yavatmal district recorded an extraordinary 27,398 delayed birth registrations within three months, triggering a probe amid suspicion of large-scale cyber fraud, officials said on Friday.

The irregularity surfaced during a vigilance drive by the health department after a state government order to cancel illegal and delayed birth and death registrations. Officials scrutinised records between September and November through the Civil Registration System.

Data from Shendursani gram panchayat in Arni taluka raised immediate red flags, with more than 27,000 delayed births entered during the period. Authorities termed the figures impossible for a village of its size.

The District Health Officer and District Registrar of Births and Deaths alerted Yavatmal ZP CEO Mandar Patki, who constituted an inquiry committee and ordered a detailed investigation.

The committee found that 27,397 of the 27,398 birth entries and seven death registrations did not belong to the gram panchayat area and were highly suspicious. The matter was forwarded to the Deputy Director of Health Services, Pune, for technical examination.

A state-level login audit revealed that the gram panchayat's CRS ID had been mapped to Mumbai. The case was subsequently referred to the Office of the Additional Registrar General of India and the National Informatics Centre in Delhi. A technical report received on 11 December flagged the entries as potentially linked to cyber fraud, following which a case was filed in Yavatmal.Officials advised registrars to report suspicious activity. —*PTI*

HC reserves verdict on ED's plea against Kerala infra

KOCHI, 19 DEC

The Kerala High Court on Friday reserved its verdict on the ED's appeal against a stay on proceedings initiated through a showcause notice to the Kerala Infra Investment Fund Board (KIIFB) in the Masala Bonds case.

A bench of Justices Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and PV Balakrishnan questioned KIIFB on why it could not respond to the notice, noting it did not allege any offence but only sought reasons for initiating proceedings.

The court also asked the ED how a Rs 466.91 crore penalty was indicated at the show cause stage without adjudication.

The ED said the notice pertains to alleged FEMA and RBI violations and does not quantify any penalty. Challenging a December 16 stay, it argued KIIFB's petition was premature.

The dispute involves KIIFB's Rs 2,150-crore Masala Bond issue in 2019, with the ED alleging prohibited real estate use, which KIIFB denies.—*PTI*

DANGEROUS RUSH

Passengers risk their lives and limbs as they try to board a train at Patna railway station in view of train delays and cancellations due to dense fog ***PHOTO: PTI***

G RAM G vs MGNREGA: What are the differences?

The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, 2025 (VB-G RAM G) , which was passed by the Parliament on Friday, repeals the MGNREGA and paves way for structural changes in the government's role in rural employment.

Passed in 2005 as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), renamed in 2009 to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), aimed to enhance livelihood security of households in rural areas.

The Act promised at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual work.

The VB-G RAM G Bill aims to establish a "rural development framework aligned with the national vision of Viksit Bharat 2047", by providing a statutory guarantee of 125 days of wage employment.

The key differences between the two rural employment frameworks:

* While the MGNREGA has a provision for 100 days of wage employment, the VB-G RAM G Bill promises 125 days of wage employment.

* MGNREGS is demand-driven, the government has to increase funding based on demand for work.

VB-G RAM G provides normative allocation to states, but any increased expenditure has to be borne by the state.

* Under MGNREGS, 100 per cent of the wages are to be paid by the Centre, while the material cost would be shared 75:25 between the Centre and the states.

Under VB-G RAM G, the state governments will take on a larger share of the expenditure than before. The financial liability would be shared between the Centre and the state in a ratio of 90:10 for the northeastern and Himalayan states, and 60:40 for remaining states and Union territories (UTs) with legislature.

For UTs without legislature, the whole cost would be borne by the Center.

Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, centre, and other leaders, protest against the VB-G RAM B Bill that seeks to replace the existing MGNREGA at the Winter session of Parliament, in New Delhi, on Friday ***PHOTO: PTI***

* Under MGNREGA, work can be sought throughout the year.

Under VB-G RAM G, the state will notify a period covering the peak agricultural seasons, during which work cannot be sought under this scheme.

* Under MGNREGA, work is divided into categories such as water conservation, drought-proofing, irrigation, renovation of traditional water bodies, land development, and flood control.

The VB-G RAM G Bill lists four domains: water security through water-related works, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related infrastructure and works for the mitigation of extreme weather events.

* Under MGNREGA, gram panchayat is responsible project identification. Plans and decisions on the nature and choice of works, worksite selection, etc, would be made in open assemblies of the gram sabha or ward sabha and ratified by the panchayat.

Under VB-G RAM G, the work undertaken shall originate from the Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans, prepared by the gram panchayats and integrated with the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan.

* There is no categorisation of panchayats under MGNREGA.

The VB-G RAM G Bill says every panchayat shall prepare saturation-mode plans based on categories determined on development parameters.

* VB-G RAM G talks about a digital ecosystem, including biometric authentication at various levels, mobile-based worksite monitoring, proactive public disclosures, and artificial intelligence for planning, audits and fraud mitigation. There is no such provision in the MGNREGA. *—PTI*

Points of difference

	MGNREGA	VB G Ram G
Number of work days	100	125
Funding	100% by Centre	60:40 share of costs between Centre & most states
Availability	Round the year	Stops during farming season
Managing body	Rural development ministry	Central Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Council

SALAR

Let me live: Kerala rape survivor on cyberattacks

The survivor of the 2017 actress sexual assault case posted an emotional message on social media on Friday, speaking out against the cyberattacks targeting her.

The message comes over a week after a court here acquitted Malayalam actor Dileep, an accused in the case, citing lack of evidence.

In an Instagram post, the actress wrote: "Not a victim, not a survivor, just a simple human being. Let me live."

Beginning the post by saying "Mistake done by me," the actress explained what she meant by the statement.

She said her so-called mistake was that after she was assaulted, she immediately lodged a complaint with the police and pursued legal remedies.

"Taking it as fate, I should have remained silent, pretending nothing had happened. Later, if the video had surfaced, I should have committed suicide when people questioned why I did not file a complaint with the police," the post read.

The actress also referred to a video released online by the second accused, Martin Antony, in which he allegedly made accusations against her.

"The video of the second accused, who was sentenced to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment, came to my notice. In that video, he should have said that it was he who had took my videos," she wrote.

The actress said that those who make such allegations, circulate them online, and their relatives should never have to face a similar situation in life.

Police have already registered a case against Antony, who made the video before he was sentenced to imprisonment.

Earlier, after the court had acquitted actor Dileep, the actress had shared a similar emotional post that received widespread public support.

Meanwhile, Malayalam film actress and dubbing artist Bhagyalakshmi, who strongly supports the complainant, alleged that she received a threat call warning her of an acid attack if she were to continue speaking up against actor Dileep.

Bhagyalakshmi told reporters that she received the call at around 12.07 pm.

"The caller used abusive language and asked whether I would speak against Dileep. I said I would. Then he asked what would happen if acid was thrown on my face. I told him to do it," she said.

Without naming the actor initially, Bhagyalakshmi said that no one from the film industry was now raising their voice against him.

"In the film industry, I am the only one speaking against him. Only common people are standing with the actress because they cannot be threatened. That is why they are trying to intimidate me," she said.

Bhagyalakshmi said she was not afraid of such threats and expressed doubt that a police complaint would yield any results.

She said that after she disconnected the call, she received multiple calls from abroad, which she did not answer.

"I expect an attack on me at any time. Even if it sounds like a joke, if anything happens to me, he will be responsible," she said.

Asked whether she was referring to Dileep, Bhagyalakshmi said, "Yes, it is Dileep."

"Because he is an expert in giving 'quotations' and knows how to come out of such cases," she alleged.

She said that, otherwise, the actor should come out openly and ask those running his public relations campaigns to stop.

"Until such an action comes from his side, we will consider that he is behind these activities," she said.

Two convicts move HC against conviction

Meanwhile, the Kerala High Court on Friday sought the government's stand on the appeals by two of the six convicts in the 2017 actress assault case in which actor Dileep was acquitted.

Justice Bechu Kurian Thomas admitted the appeals by Pradeep and Saleem H, also known as Vadival Salim, who have challenged their conviction and sentence of 20 years imprisonment.

The two also sought suspension of their sentence during the pendency of their appeals.

The court gave the prosecution time to file its objections to the appeals and listed them for hearing on 4 February, 2026.

Besides Pradeep and Saleem, the Ernakulam District and Principal Sessions Court Judge Honey M Varghese had on 12 December sentenced Sunil NS, also known as Pulsar Suni, Martin Antony, Manikandan B and Vijesh VP to twenty years of rigorous imprisonment for the offence of gang rape.

On 8 December, the court had acquitted four accused, including actor Dileep.

The assault on the multilingual actress, after the accused persons had allegedly forced their way into her car and held it under their control for two hours on 17 February in 2017, had shocked Kerala.

Prime accused Pulsar Suni sexually assaulted the actress and video recorded the act with the help of the other convicted persons in the moving car. —PTI

Actor Dileep was acquitted in the abduction and sexual assault case involving a Kerala actress in 2017, two of the convicted have now moved Kerala High Court for relief ***PHOTO: PTI***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Here's how Japan's rate hike will impact world economy

The Bank of Japan raised its key policy rate to a 30-year high on Friday in a widely anticipated move that could rattle world markets.

The two-day BOJ policy meeting wrapped up with the 0.25 per cent hike in benchmark short-term rate. Taking the policy rate to 0.75 per cent, its highest since 1995.

In a statement, the central bank said the decision was unanimous and that it expected to raise rates further if there are no major changes in the outlook for the economy.

The 0.75 per cent rate is still low by most standards, but the BOJ has kept that rate near or below zero for years, trying to pull the economy out of a deflationary funk. Since the pandemic, most central banks, like the US Federal Reserve, have raised rates to counter spiking inflation and then begun cutting them to help their slowing economies recover momentum.

Japan's own economy contracted at a 2.3 per cent annual rate in the last quarter, but improved business sentiment and price pressures have led the BOJ to raise rates. Here are some things to know about its decision.

Japan's interest rates rise while other countries' fall

Since Japan's economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, the central bank has kept borrowing costs low to encourage more spending by businesses and consumers.

Lower interest rates have also helped the manage the country's massive national debt, which amounts to nearly triple the size of the economy.

As Japan's population has aged and begun declining, its economy has slowed and that led to deflation, or falling prices due to weak demand. Even with cheap credit, investment has lagged, stunting economic growth.

In early 2013, the central bank launched what was dubbed a "big bazooka" of monetary easing, cutting interest rates and purchasing government bonds and other securities to help channel more money into the economy.

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the benchmark interest rate was at minus 0.1 per cent. The BOJ only began raising it in 2024, the first hike in 17 years, after inflation stabilised above its target of about 2 per cent.

A weaker Japanese yen has pushed inflation higher

The Japanese yen has weakened against the US dollar and many other major currencies. That has raised the cost, in yen terms, of imported food, fuel and other items needed to keep the fourth largest economy running.

Higher interest rates are expected to raise the value of the yen against the dollar as investments flow into Japan seeking higher yen-denominated yields ***PHOTO: BANK OF JAPAN***

The strong appetite for investing in dollar-denominated shares of companies linked to the artificial intelligence boom has also pulled money out of the yen and into dollars.

So, inflation has risen faster than wages, squeezing household budgets and raising costs for businesses.

Higher interest rates are expected to raise the value of the yen against the dollar as investments flow into Japan. Friday's move would signal the central bank's intention of continuing to "normalise" its monetary policy with further rate hikes next year.

"The BOJ's stance towards rate hikes reflects the fact that inflation is becoming entrenched," Kei Fujimoto, a senior economist at SuMi Trust, said in a commentary. "If drivers such as a further depreciation of the yen accelerate inflation going forward, it is possible that the pace of rate hikes will also increase accordingly."

The dollar is worth about 156 Japanese yen, nearly twice its level in 2012 and near its highest level this year.

World markets are bracing for impact

Even small changes in interest rates can have a big impact on markets. A rate hike in Japan would undermine an investment strategy known as the "carry trade". That involves investors borrowing cheaply in yen and then using that money to invest in higher paying assets elsewhere.

Any such major shift is likely to reverberate across world markets. Carry trades are lucrative when stocks and other investments are climbing, but losses can snowball when many traders face pressure to sell stocks or other assets all at once.

A rate hike also is expected to crimp demand for other assets, including cryptocurrencies. Reports last week that the BOJ would go ahead and raise rates caused the price of bitcoin, for example, to drop below USD 86,000. The original cryptocurrency had bolted to record highs near USD 125,000 in early October.

Risks for Japan

Judging the timing and scale of changes to interest rates and other monetary policies are the biggest challenge for central banks, given the time it takes for such moves to ripple through the real economy and financial markets.

Like the Federal Reserve, Japan's central bank struggles to balance the need to boost business activity and create jobs with the imperative of containing inflation.

The BOJ held off on raising rates earlier given uncertainties over how US President Donald Trump's tariffs might hit automakers and other exporters. A deal setting US duties on imports from Japan at 15 per cent, down from the earlier plan for a 25 per cent rate, has helped ease those concerns.

BOJ Governor Kazuo Ueda has indicated he believes wages will continue to rise in Japan as companies compete for a shrinking pool of workers, helping to support growth.

Market watchers will be watching closely to see what Ueda says Friday about the outlook for future surges in interest rate. *—PTI*

Bangladesh media houses set on fire

Too much smoke, can't breathe, says a scribe; Yunus calls for peace and restraint

DAKHA, 19 DEC

An uneasy calm ensued in Bangladesh after Thursday night saw intense unrest following the death of Inqilab Moncho convenor Sharif Osman bin Hadi, with mobs attacking media houses, political offices, cultural institutions and private residences, triggering widespread vandalism, arson and road blockades.

The night-long unrest marked one of the most severe episodes of violence targeting media institutions in recent years, leaving journalists traumatised and large parts of the country on edge.

One of the most serious incidents occurred at Karwan Bazar, where the offices of English-language daily The Daily Star and Bangla daily Prothom Alo were attacked, while in Chattogram, a group of protesters staged a sit-in outside the Indian Assistant High Commission.

People take to the streets to protest in Dhaka; Security forces guard Bangladesh news portal Prothom Alo daily newspaper which was set on fire by angry protesters **PHOTOS: PTI**

According to a journalist, newsroom staff at The Daily Star were alerted by a phone call that a mob, after vandalising the Prothom Alo office, was heading towards their building.

As staff attempted to evacuate, the crowd reached the ground floor, vandalising the building before setting it on fire. Thick smoke quickly filled the premises, forcing journalists to abandon attempts to descend. A group fled to the rooftop on the 10th floor, where 28 people became trapped.

The journalist said that a canteen worker attempted to escape using an external fire-exit ladder but was caught and beaten by the mob upon reaching the ground. No one else dared to climb down after that.

Senior journalist Zyma Islam posted on Facebook during the ordeal: "I can't breathe. So much smoke. I'm inside. You are trying to kill me."

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus vowed to bring those involved in Hadi's brutal murder to justice quickly while urging citizens to maintain law and order and resist violence by a "few fringe elements".

"I sincerely call upon all citizens - keep your patience and restraint," he said. "No one can stop the democratic progress of this country through threat, terrorist activities or bloodshed."

Security was tightened as Border Guard Bangladesh personnel were deployed at multiple locations across Dhaka to maintain order. *—Agencies*

US bombs 2 drug boats in Pacific killing 5

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

The US military on Thursday said that two more airstrikes were conducted against boats alleged to be involved in drug smuggling in the eastern Pacific Ocean resulting in the deaths of five individuals. In a social media post, US Southern Command stated "Intelligence confirmed that the vessels were transiting along known narco-trafficking routes in the Eastern Pacific and were engaged in narco-trafficking operations," although no evidence was provided. Videos posted showed each boat speeding before being struck by explosions. The military reported three fatalities from one vessel and two from another, bringing the total strikes on boats to 28 and deaths to at least 104, as stated by the Trump administration. *—PTI*

IS-K spokesperson arrested by Pak: UN report

ISLAMABAD, 19 DEC

Pakistani authorities arrested Sultan Aziz Azzam, the spokesperson for Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), earlier this year, as indicated in a recent UN Security Council report. The UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team noted that Azzam's arrest in May significantly hampered IS-K's operational capabilities, resulting in setbacks for the group's propaganda through the Al-Azaim Foundation. The report highlighted a decline in IS-K's activities due to effective counter-terrorism measures in Pakistan, while questioning the Taliban's claims of a terrorism-free Afghanistan. Azzam has been linked to multiple high-profile attacks, including the 26 August, 2021, suicide bombing at Kabul airport, and he circulated messages from IS-K following various violent incidents in 2021 and 2020. *—PTI*

Brazil's Lower House expels Bolsonaro's son

SAO PAULO, 19 DEC

Brazil's Lower House speaker, Hugo Motta, announced on Thursday the removal of two lawmakers connected to former President Jair Bolsonaro, who is currently serving a 27-year sentence for orchestrating a coup attempt. Among the expelled, Eduardo Bolsonaro, the former president's son, was one removed for his absence from over 80 per cent of this year's sessions, as he resides in Texas. "He has not attended our house's sessions and it is impossible to serve one's term as a lawmaker if that person is not in our territory," Motta stated. Alexandre Ramagem, the ex-head of Brazil's intelligence agency, was also removed following a Supreme Court order after he fled to the US to avoid a 16-year sentence. *—PTI*

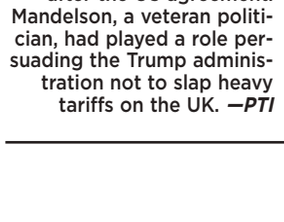


PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Amid Epstein scandal, UK names new US envoy

LONDON, 19 DEC

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer appointed Christian Turner the UK's current permanent representative to United Nations as a new UK ambassador to the United States on Thursday, replacing a diplomat Pater Mandelson who was fired for his links to sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. "The United Kingdom and United States have a very special relationship, and Christian's extensive experience as an outstanding diplomat will support this uniquely close bond and ensure it continues to flourish," British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said. Turner, a veteran diplomat, will take on the role after the US agreement. Mandelson, a veteran politician, had played a role persuading the Trump administration not to slap heavy tariffs on the UK. *—PTI*

Trump suspends green card lottery programme

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

President Donald Trump suspended the green card lottery programme on Thursday that allowed the suspect in the Brown University and MIT shootings to come to the United States.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said in a post on X that, as per Trump's orders, she is ordering the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to suspend the programme.

"This individual should never have been allowed into our country," she said of the suspect, Portuguese national Claudio Neves Valente.

In 2017, he was issued a diversity immigrant visa and later obtained legal permanent residence status.

The diversity visa programme makes up to 50,000 green cards available each year by lottery to people from countries that are little represented in the US, many of them in Africa. The lottery was created by Congress, and the move is almost certain to invite legal challenges.

Nearly 20 million people applied for the 2025 visa lottery, with more than 131,000 selected when including spouses with the winners. After winning, they must undergo vetting to win admission. Portuguese citizens won only 38 slots. *— PTI*

Donald Trump

US GOVERNMENT BLOCKS TRANSGENDER CARE TO KIDS

Health officials announced on Thursday that the federal government will block transgender care to children by targeting hospitals and doctors that provide it, CNN reported. New proposed rules would prohibit hospitals from participating in Medicare and Medicaid if they provide care such as puberty blockers and surgeries for transgender minors, and would prevent federal coverage of such treatments, Health Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr said.

TRUMP RECLASSIFIES GANJA AS LESS DANGEROUS DRUG

Trump signed an executive order Thursday that would reclassify marijuana as a less dangerous drug and open new avenues for medical research, a major shift in federal drug policy that inches closer to what many states have done. The switch would move marijuana away from its current classification as a Schedule I drug, alongside heroin and LSD. It would instead be a Schedule III substance, like ketamine and some anabolic steroids.

Brown University shooting suspect found dead

PROVIDENCE, 19 DEC

The search for the suspect, Claudio Neves Valente, 48, in last weekend's mass shooting at Brown University ended Thursday at a New Hampshire storage facility where he was found dead.

Investigators believe he is responsible for killing two students and wounding nine other people in a Brown University lecture hall last Saturday, then killing Portuguese MIT professor Nuno FG Loureiro two days later at his Brookline home. Providence police chief Col. Oscar Perez said Neves Valente acted alone.

Brown University President Christina Paxson said Neves Valente was enrolled there as a graduate student studying physics from fall 2000 to the spring of 2001.

Neves Valente and Loureiro had earlier attended the same academic programme at a university in Portugal between 1995 and 2000, US attorney for Massachusetts Leah B. Foley said.

Loureiro graduated from the physics programme at the Instituto Superior Técnico, Portugal's premier engineering school, in 2000, according to his MIT faculty page. *—PTI*

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy before a round table meeting at the EU Summit in Brussels **PHOTO: PTI**

EU TO LOAN €90B TO UKRAINE; NO FROZEN RUSSIAN ASSETS USED

KYIV, 19 DEC

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday welcomed the European Union's decision to provide 90 billion euros to Ukraine for 2026-27. This does not include any Russian asset frozen by the European Union.

Zelenskyy calling it "significant support" in strengthening the country.

Zelenskyy said that it is important that Russian assets remain immobilised and that Ukraine has received financial security guarantees for the coming years. "Together we are protecting the future of our continent," he said.

European Council President Antonio Costa announced the decision after hours of talks in Brussels.

"We have a deal. The decision to provide 90 billion euros to Ukraine for 2026-27 was approved," Costa wrote on X.

The package will be provided as an interest-free loan, financed through European Union borrowing on capital markets.

- The package will be provided as an interest-free loan, financed through EU borrowing. The frozen Russian assets were not used, but Zelenskyy said it was important that they remained frozen

Meanwhile, a Kremlin envoy will travel to Florida to discuss a US-proposed plan to end the war in Ukraine, a US official said Thursday, as the Trump administration pushes for a deal.

Kirill Dmitriev, who heads Russia's sovereign wealth fund, is set to meet Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner in Miami on Saturday, an American official said. *— Agencies*

'Russian troops are advancing fast in Ukraine'

MOSCOW, 19 DEC

Russian President Vladimir Putin said that military goals would be achieved in Ukraine, asserting that the troops were gaining rapidly.

During a highly orchestrated year-end news conference, combined with a nationwide call-in show, Putin highlighted the troops' progress. Despite falling short of the swift advance many had expected, he claimed that Russian forces have "fully seized strategic initiative" and would secure further gains by the end of the year.

> **Our troops are advancing all across the line of contact, faster in some areas or slower in some others, but the enemy is retreating in all sectors**
>
> -Vladimir Putin, Russian President

Putin reaffirmed Moscow's readiness for a peaceful settlement that would address the "root causes" of the conflict, a reference to the Kremlin's tough conditions for a deal.

Putin rebuffed Western claims about purported Russian plans to attack European nations as "sheer nonsense".

""How can you prepare NATO for a war with Russia if the main member of NATO doesn't consider us as an enemy?" Putin said, in a veiled reference to the US. *—PTI*

Australia to buy back guns after mass shooting

SYDNEY, 19 DEC

Australia will use a sweeping buyback scheme to "get guns off our streets," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in wake of the Bondi Beach mass shooting.

Sajid Akram and his son Naveed are accused of opening fire on a beach during a Hanukah event and killing 15 people in one of the nation's worst mass shootings.

Albanese vowed on Friday to toughen laws that allowed 50-year-old Sajid to own six high-powered rifles.

"There is no reason someone living in the suburbs of Sydney needed this many guns," he said. Australia would pay gun owners to surrender "surplus, newly banned and illegal firearms."

It would be the largest gun buyback since 1996, when Australia cracked down on firearms in the wake of a shooting that killed 35 people at Port Arthur. The buyback comes as Australian states are moving to tighten gun lawns.

Meanwhile, Australia said that Sunday would be a national day of reflection for those killed on Bondi Beach, as he called on the public to light candles exactly one week after the attack.

—Agencies

Witkoff to host talks for Phase 2 of Gaza ceasefire

JERUSALEM, 19 DEC

US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff will host top officials from Middle Eastern countries mediating the Gaza ceasefire on Friday, aiming to push the tenuous agreement into its next phase, a State department official said.

Witkoff is US President Donald Trump's key delegate for handling peace negotiations. He will meet in Miami with officials from Qatar, Egypt and Turkey, said the official.

The officials will review the implementation of Phase 2 of the ceasefire agreement.

The US-brokered truce took effect on 10 October, pausing more than two years of war.

In the first phase, Hamas returned the hostages it was holding while Israel returned thousands of Palestinian prisoners and allowed greater quantities of humanitarian aid into war-battered Gaza. The ceasefire has since stalled, with both sides accusing the other of violations.

- The second phase involves the deployment of an international security force, an internationally supervised governing body for Gaza, the disarmament of Hamas and Israeli troop withdrawals

The more challenging second phase involves the deployment of an international security force, an internationally supervised technocratic governing body for Gaza, the disarmament of Hamas and Israeli troop withdrawals. The process is to be overseen by a "Board of Peace" chaired by Trump.

Neither the board nor the international force have yet assembled. *—PTI*

FILES OUT TOMORROW

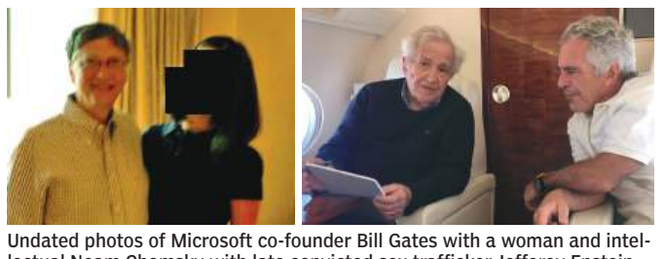
New Epstein photos show him with Bill Gates, Chomsky

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

With the Justice Department facing a Friday deadline to release files on convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, US House Democrats on Thursday published a fresh batch of photographs of his estate, showing notable figures including intellectual Noam Chomsky and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates.

The 68 images -- shared without added context -- are part of a much larger cache that Congress obtained from Epstein's estate and has been slowly releasing as pressure mounts on US President Donald Trump.

The cache also includes images of filmmaker Woody Allen and former Trump strategist Steve Bannon -- both of whom featured in an earlier photo release. However, being photographed on Epstein's estate or knowing the late financer is not a proof of guilt – as dozens of public figures have argued.



Undated photos of Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates with a woman and intellectual Noam Chomsky with late convicted sex trafficker Jefferey Epstein **PHOTO: X @OVERSIGHTDEMS**

The pictures also show the skin of a woman, with writings from Vladimir Nabokov's 'Lolita,' a novel about a man's sexual obsession with a child.

The release of the 'Epstein files' has long been demanded by a public hungry to learn whether any of Epstein's rich and powerful associates knew about — or participated in — the abuse.

Bowing to public pressure, Trump signed on 19 November a proclamation giving that the Justice Department 30 days to release its files communications related to Epstein, including information about the investigation into Epstein's death. *—Agencies*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

Silver retreats from record level at Rs 2.04L/kg

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Silver prices retreated from the record level in the national capital on Friday, with the white metal plunging by Rs 3,500 to Rs 2,04,100 per kilogram due to emergence of fresh selling from stockists and retailers, according to the All India Sarafa Association. In the local bullion market, gold prices are traded almost flat at Rs 1,36,515 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes) from Thursday's closing of Rs 1,36,500 per 10g. It had surged Rs 1,800 to scale a fresh peak of Rs 2,07,600 per kg on Thursday. In the international markets, spot gold slipped by USD 10.09, or 0.23 per cent, to USD 4,322.51 per ounce. On the other hand, spot silver was trading 0.56 per cent higher at USD 65.85 per ounce in the overseas trade. *—PTI*

Flipkart buys majority stake in Minivet AI

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Ecommerce company Flipkart on Friday said it has acquired a majority stake in Minivet AI, an Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning solutions provider.The acquisition is a strategic move to build and invest in core Generative AI (GenAI) capabilities, at a time when e-commerce is rapidly shifting towards visual, conversational, and AI-led discovery, the Walmart-backed ecommerce firm said in a statement.It, however, did not disclose the financial details of the acquisition, including the quantum of stake bought or size of deal. The latest move is expected to accelerate the transition to a more intuitive, interactive, and immersive shopping experience for e-commerce platforms, including Flipkart, it said. *—PTI*

Coca-Cola India profit up 46.3% to ₹615 crore

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Coca-Cola India reported a 46.3 per cent surge in consolidated profit to Rs 615.03 crore in FY25. Revenue from operations grew 7 per cent while total income rose 7.7 per cent for the fiscal year. Comparatively, Coca-Cola India's net profit was Rs 420.3 crore in FY24. The total tax expense of Coca-Cola India in FY25 was up 33 per cent to Rs 228.08 crore, compared to Rs 171.42 crore in FY24. Coca-Cola India's total expenses rose 2.8 per cent in FY25, with the company operating through brands such as Coca-Cola, Thums Up, Limca, Sprite, Maaza and Minute Maid. The company also runs Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages, in which it recently divested a 40 per cent stake to the Jubilant Bhartia Group. *—PTI*

Airtel approves Rs 401.25/share call on rights issue

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The board of telecom giant Bharti Airtel has sanctioned a 'first and final call' of Rs 401.25 per share on 39.2 crore partly paid-up equity shares, amounting to over Rs 15,700 crore from its remaining rights issue. The funds raised will primarily be allocated towards the pre-payment and repayment of borrowings (including accrued interest) and various corporate purposes. This move, coupled with Airtel's organic cash generation, is expected to render the company's India operations effectively net debt-free in the near term, aside from its liabilities to the Department of Telecom and finance lease obligations. In a filing dated Thursday, Airtel stated, "...the Board of Directors...has approved the first and final call of Rs 401.25 per share...on 392,287,662 outstanding partly paid-up equity shares of face value of INR 5 each." *—PTI*

Japan's MUFG to acquire 20% stake in Shriram Finance

This is the largest cross-border investment in India's financial sector

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Japan's Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group Inc (MUFG) will acquire a 20 per cent minority stake in non-bank lender Shriram Finance Ltd for Rs 39,618 crore (around USD 4.4 billion), marking the largest cross-border investment in India's financial sector to date.

MUFG will pick up the minority stake through preferential equity shares, Shriram Finance said in a statement.

The signing of definitive agreements with MUFG Bank reinforces confidence in India's lending and financial services sector fundamentals and future growth potential, the statement said, adding that it will also strengthen SFL's capital base and accelerate its growth trajectory.

The proposed investment by MUFG Bank is subject to shareholder approval, regulatory clearances and customary closing conditions, it said.

"This collaboration combines SFL's established domestic franchise and extensive distribution network with MUFG Bank's global expertise and financial strength.

The fund infusion will significantly enhance SFL's capital adequacy, strengthen its balance sheet, and provide long-term growth capital," it said.

This partnership is further expected to unlock synergies in technology, innovation, and customer engagement, driving sustainable growth, it said.

The partnership will also improve access to low-cost liabilities and potentially strengthen SFL's credit ratings while aligning governance and operational practices with global best standards, it added.

- Earlier in October, Emirates NBD Bank, the second-largest in the UAE, expressed interest in acquiring a 60 per cent majority stake in RBL Bank for Rs 26,853 crore.

Earlier in October, Emirates NBD Bank, the second-largest in the UAE, expressed interest in acquiring a 60 per cent majority stake in RBL Bank for Rs 26,853 crore.

MUFG, MUFG Bank's parent entity, has a legacy of over 130 years in India, having invested USD 1.7 billion and created approximately 5,000 jobs.

Upon completion of the investment, Shriram Finance will become an equity-method affiliate of both MUFG and MUFG Bank, and MUFG plans to appoint two directors to Shriram Finance's board. *—PTI*

AFTER DAYS OF FALL

Rupee rises 53P, closes at 89.67 against USD

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The rupee appreciated 53 paise to close at 89.67 against the US dollar on Friday, supported by corporate dollar inflows and easing crude oil prices.

Forex traders said a positive trend in domestic equities and Brent crude oil prices hovering near USD 59 per barrel supported the domestic unit at lower levels.

The gain in the USD/INR pair follows the rupee's string of record lows in recent weeks, likely on intervention from the Reserve Bank of India, they added.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 90.19 against the US dollar, then recovered some lost ground to touch an intra-day high of 89.25, registering a 95-paise gain from its previous close. At the end of the trading session on Friday, the rupee was quoted at 89.67, up 53 paise from its previous close.

On Thursday, the rupee appreciated by 18 paise to close at 90.20 against the US dollar.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.24 per cent higher at 98.66.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 0.37 per cent lower at USD 59.60 per barrel in futures trade.

Foreign Institutional Investors purchased equities worth Rs 1,830.89 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. India's forex reserves jumped by USD 1.689 billion to USD 688.949 billion during the week ended December 12, the Reserve Bank of India said on Friday. *—PTI*

Sensex, Nifty bounce back on firm global trends

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded sharply on Friday after sliding for the past four sessions, propelled by bargain hunting in select blue-chip stocks amid a firm trend overseas.

Renewed optimism around further monetary policy easing by the US Federal Reserve, fresh foreign fund inflows and an appreciating rupee also supported the domestic market, traders said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 447.55 points, or 0.53 per cent, to settle at 84,929.36. During the day, it surged 585.69 points, or 0.69 per cent, to 85,067.50.

A total of 2,731 stocks advanced, while 1,444 declined and 156 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 150.85 points, or 0.58 per cent, to 25,966.40.

On the weekly front, the BSE benchmark declined by 338.3 points or 0.39 per cent, and the Nifty dipped by 80.55 points or 0.30 per cent.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Bharat Electronics, Power Grid, Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles, Asian Paints, Reliance Industries, HDFC Bank and Bajaj Finserv were among the biggest gainers.

In contrast, HCL Tech, Kotak Mahindra Bank, ICICI Bank, and Sun Pharma were the laggards. The BSE midcap gauge jumped 1.26 per cent, and the smallcap index climbed 1.25 per cent.All sectoral indices ended higher. Realty surged 1.68 per cent, capital goods (1.65 per cent), telecommunication (1.54 per cent), industrials (1.49 per cent), utilities (1.25 per cent) and power (1.24 per cent).

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi, Japan's Nikkei 225 index, Shanghai's SSE Composite index, and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index settled in positive territory.

Equity markets in Europe were trading higher. US markets ended higher on Thursday. *—PTI*

Adani plans Rs 1 lakh cr investment in airports

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Adani Group has announced plans to invest Rs 1 lakh crore in its airports business over the next five years, expecting robust growth in India's aviation sector, projected to expand by 15-16 per cent annually.

Jeet Adani, director of Adani Airports and son of billionaire **Gautam Adani**, stated, "On the airport side, Rs 1-lakh crore in the next five years," ahead of the commercial operations launch at Navi Mumbai International Airport on 25 December.

The Navi Mumbai International Airport, developed by Navi Mumbai International Airport Ltd (NMIAL) in which Adani holds a 74 per cent stake, is set to begin operations with an initial capacity of 20 million passengers annually, eventually scaling up to 90 million. The investment highlights Adani Group's commitment to expanding its airport portfolio, which includes six other airports across India.

Adani Group is poised to bid aggressively in the next round of airport privatisations, with Jeet Adani affirming, "we would be 100 per cent very aggressive in the next round of bidding for all 11 airports." The group plans ongoing investments in capacity upgrades and ancillary services while maintaining a focus on separation of its infrastructure and aircraft services. *—PTI*

'Insurance Bill to drive sector expansion'

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Insurance legislation passed by Parliament this week is expected to significantly boost growth in the sector and make insurance more affordable and accessible, LIC Chief Executive and Managing Director R Doraiswamy said on Friday.

Welcoming the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill 2025, Doraiswamy said the reforms strengthen policyholder protection, transparency and regulatory oversight. Updating legacy provisions and tightening governance norms would improve accountability and build greater confidence in long-term insurance products, he said.

Parliament on Wednesday cleared the Bill, which permits 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance sector. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the move would help deepen insurance penetration and attract much-needed capital to support technology adoption, stronger risk management and globally competitive products. It also mandates public consultations and standard operating procedures for regulations issued by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), enhancing transparency and consistency.

Doraiswamy said the reforms would promote innovation, enable targeted products for retirement and health needs, and expand coverage among underserved groups, including rural households, informal workers and first-time policyholders. *—PTI*

ICICI Prudential AMC jumps over 20% on debut

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Shares of ICICI Prudential Asset Management Company Ltd made a strong stock market debut on Friday, listing at a premium of over 20 per cent to the issue price of Rs 2,165.

On the BSE, the stock opened at Rs 2,606.20, up 20.37 per cent, and later rose nearly 23 per cent to Rs 2,662. It listed at Rs 2,600 on the NSE, a gain of 20 per cent. Following the debut, the company's market capitalisation stood at Rs 1,27,790.54 crore.

The Rs 10,602.65 crore initial public offering was priced in the range of Rs 2,061–2,165 per share and was subscribed 39.17 times on the final day of bidding, driven by strong demand from institutional investors. ICICI Prudential AMC is a subsidiary of ICICI Bank.

With the listing, the company joined other publicly traded asset managers such as HDFC AMC, UTI AMC, Aditya Birla Sun Life AMC, Shriram AMC and Nippon Life India Asset Management. It also became the fifth ICICI Group Company to be listed, after ICICI Bank, ICICI Prudential Life Insurance, ICICI Lombard General Insurance and ICICI Securities. *—PTI*

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Will take action after report on IndiGo chaos: Official

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Authorities are set to implement corrective actions following a probe into recent flight disruptions faced by IndiGo, India's largest airline. A four-member panel established by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is expected to finalise its report soon. As a direct consequence of these disruptions, the DGCA has reduced IndiGo's winter flight schedule by 10 per cent, noting that the airline typically operates around 2,300 flights daily. A senior government official stated, "Elaborate and corrective actions will be taken after studying the panel's report," emphasising ongoing efforts to prevent future disruptions during the busy travel season.

In related news, the Delhi High Court has called for a response from the Customs department regarding InterGlobe Aviation's plea for a refund exceeding Rs 900 crore, which was paid as Customs duty for re-imported aircraft engines and parts after overseas repairs. The court is set to hear the matter again on 8 April, 2026. The airline contends that charging duty on these re-imports constitutes unconstitutional double taxation. The Customs department argues that the issue is currently pending before the SC, where no stay order has been issued. *—PTI*

TIKTOK BACK IN US

TikTok to sell US unit to Oracle, Silver Lake & MGX

SAN FRANCISCO, 19 DEC

TikTok has signed a deal to sell its US business to three American investors — Oracle, Silver Lake and MGX — ensuring the popular social video platform can continue operating in the United States.

The deal is expected to close on 22 January, according to an internal memo seen by The Associated Press. CEO Shou Zi Chew told employees in the memo that ByteDance and TikTok have signed binding agreements with the three investors.

Half of the new TikTok US joint venture will be owned by a consortium of investors — among them Oracle, Silver Lake and MGX will each hold a 15 per cent share. Another 30.1 per cent will be held by affiliates of existing ByteDance investors and 19.9 per cent will be retained by the China-based ByteDance, according to the memo.

The US venture will have a new, seven-member majority-American board of directors, the memo said. It will also be subject to terms that "protect Americans' data and US national security."

US user data will be stored locally in a system run by Oracle. TikTok's algorithm — the secret sauce that powers its addictive video feed — will be retrained on US user data to "ensure the content feed is free from outside manipulation," the memo said. The US venture will also oversee content moderation and policies within the country.

The deal marks the end of years of uncertainty about the fate of the popular video-sharing platform in the United States. *—PTI*

Net direct tax collection grows to Rs 17.04L crore

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Net direct tax collection grew 8 per cent to over Rs 17.04 lakh crore between 1 April to 17 December, supported by 14 per cent drop in refund issuance compared to last year, the income tax department data reported on Friday. Total refunds issued during this period stood at Rs 2.97 lakh crore.

The collection includes net corporate tax mop-up of over Rs 8.17 lakh crore and non-corporate tax of Rs 8.47 lakh crore. Additionally, net revenue from Securities Transaction Tax (STT) stood at Rs 40,195 crore as of 17 December of this fiscal year.

Gross direct tax collections, before adjusting refunds, recorded 4.16 per cent growth at over Rs 20.01 lakh crore till 17 December. *—PTI*

'Millennials, Gen Z drive 90% of India's int'l trips'

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

A significant shift in India's outbound travel landscape was revealed in a new report, indicating that millennials and Gen Z were responsible for nine out of ten international journeys in 2025. The annual travel report, published by travel-banking fintech platform Niyo, illustrates how young, digitally-savvy Indians are transforming global travel trends with their focus on smarter planning, solo exploration, and cost-effective choices.

According to the findings, "Gen Z and Millennials accounted for 9 in 10 international trips. Two-thirds of these journeys originated from Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai, reflecting the strong influence of India's leading metros in outbound travel."

Solo travel emerged as the preferred choice, with 63.8 per cent of trips taken by individuals. Couples comprised 19.93 per cent, while families accounted for 12.26 per cent, and groups made up 4.01 per cent, showcasing a shift towards independent travel.

The report highlighted Thailand as the top destination, making up 23.08 per cent of trips, followed closely by the UAE at 21.57 per cent. Other prominent locations included Georgia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. *—PTI*

Rohit, Jaiswal to miss initial Vijay Hazare games

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Prominent India players such as Rohit Sharma, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Suryakumar Yadav will not compete in at least the first two matches of the Vijay Hazare Trophy as the selectors are keen to have youngsters in the Mumbai side. Ajinkya Rahane and Shivam Dube will also miss the initial games. Mumbai chief selector Sanjay Patil told PTI, "Yashasvi is undergoing treatment for a stomach issue and he should be alright soon. We thought that the youngsters should be given a chance." The elite division of the 50-over tournament will be held from 24 December to 8 January in Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Jaipur, Bengaluru while Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru will host the knockout matches from 12-18 January. Mumbai are placed in Group C with Punjab, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Chhattisgarh. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

ED seizes assets of Yuvraj & Uthappa in betting case

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Assets of former Indian cricketers Yuvraj Singh and Robin Uthappa apart from that of ex TMC MP Mimi Chakraborty and actor Sonu Sood have been attached by the ED in an "illegal" betting app linked money laundering case estimated to be worth Rs 1,000 crore, sources said. Properties of actor Neha Sharma, mother of model Urvashi Rautela and Bengali actor Ankush Hazra have also been attached. These include assets worth Rs 1 crore of Sood, Rs 59 lakh of Chakraborty, Rs 2.5 crore of Yuvraj Singh, Rs 1.26 crore of Sharma, Rs 8.26 lakh of Uthappa, Rs 47 lakh of Hazra and Rs 2.02 crore of Rautela's mother. These assets are seized under Prevention of Money Laundering Act. *—PTI*

NZC CEO to quit over differences with players

CHRISTCHURCH, 19 DEC

New Zealand Cricket (NZC) chief executive Scott Weenink will step down from his position following differences with players and member associations over the future direction of the game, particularly the role of T20 cricket. Weenink, who has been in the role for two-and-a-half years, will conclude his tenure on 30 January. This comes amid reports that Weenink was opposed to a proposed franchise-based T20 league that has the backing of New Zealand's players' association and six major state bodies of NZC. "After careful consideration, it has become clear that I hold a different view from several Member Associations, and the NZCPA, on the future priorities for NZC," Weenink said in a NZC release. He said it is better if new leadership takes over. *—PTI*

Retired NASCAR driver Biffle killed in plane crash

STATESVILLE, 19 DEC

Former NASCAR driver Greg Biffle and his family were killed in plane crash in North Carolina on Thursday. Reports said that the Cessna C550 erupted into a large fire when it hit the ground, shortly after take-off, killing all seven people on board. The plane had departed Statesville Regional Airport, about 72 kilometres north of Charlotte, but soon crashed while trying to return and land, the North Carolina State Highway Patrol said. Flight records show the plane was registered to a company run by Biffle. The cause of the crash wasn't immediately known, nor was the reason for the plane's return to the airport in drizzle and cloudy conditions. *—PTI*

India U-19 enter Asia Cup final

George & Malhotra set up a title date with arch-rival Pakistan

DUBAI, 19 DEC

Vice-captain **Vihaan Malhotra**'s exhilarating stroke-play was well complemented by Aaron George's composure as India U-19 set up an U-19 Asia Cup summit date with arch-rivals Pakistan after crushing Sri Lanka colts by eight wickets in a rain-curtailed semi-final here on Friday.

After rain reduced the match to 20-overs per side, the Indian bowling unit, which has been spot on throughout the tournament, restricted Sri Lanka to 138 for 8 in 20 overs.

In reply, left-handed Malhotra (61 not out off 45 balls), who was snapped by RCB at the recently-concluded IPL mini auction, flicked and pulled with ease to hit a couple of sixes apart from muscling a few boundaries.

His partner and India's crisis man in this event, George (58 not out off 49 balls), was technically perfect with his strokes as India chased down the target in 18 overs.

India's eighth appearance in the final was built on the unbroken 114-run stand for the third wicket between Malhotra and George.

> India's eighth appearance in the final was built on the unbroken 114-run stand for the third wicket between Malhotra and George.

In the other semi-final, Pakistan beat Bangladesh by eight wickets, and the bitter neighbours will meet in the continental final after a gap of 11 years.

The last time India U-19 beat Pakistan in the Asia Cup final in 2014, the team comprised of Shreyas Iyer, Sarfaraz Khan, Sanju Samson and Kuldeep Yadav, to name a few.

India U-19 had an inauspicious start to its chase with teenage IPL sensations Ayush Mhatre (7) and Vaibhav Suryavanshi (9) being done in by pacer Rasith Nimsara. Mhatre, who has endured a horrible tournament, was hurried into a mis-timed pull by a short ball from Nimsara.

Sri Lanka U19 were still giving a fight till the 13th over bowled by Dunith Sigera where Malhotra first played a short firm pull for a boundary, followed by a drive through extra cover and then another front-foot pull that landed on the grass banks. *—PTI*

T20WC could be SKY's last as skipper

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Skipper Suryakumar Yadav and his deputy Shubman Gill's indifferent form is a massive concern, but the national selection committee is unlikely to make any shocking changes when it picks the 15-member squad for next year's T20 World Cup here on Saturday.

The BCCI would be at liberty to replace any of the named 15 till the start of the T20 World Cup on 7 February. For the record, during the Champions Trophy earlier this year, Varun Chakravarthy replaced Yashasvi Jaiswal after slow tracks in Dubai were taken into consideration.

While nobody in BCCI is spelling it out, the global event in India could well be the last for Suryakumar as national T20 skipper. He is already 35 and has been out of form for the past one year.

Having endured a barren run for almost 14 months and across 24 games, Suryakumar is holding on to his place only because he is the captain. However, what has worked for Suryakumar is an early T20 World Cup and form deserting his deputy Gill, who was being seen as the all-format captain after taking over the reins of the Test and ODI sides.

The committee will also pick the T20 squad for New Zealand which will be the same as the one chosen for the T20 World Cup.

For the time being, there aren't any slots up for grabs although Gill's position has repeatedly come under scanner while an in-form Yashasvi Jaiswal waits in the wings.

It remains to be seen if the selectors name Jaiswal as an extra player for the New Zealand series just to observe him in case he is needed during the mega-event to be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka. *—PTI*

3RD ASHES TEST

Head's hundred helps Australia to a 356-run lead

ADELAIDE, 19 DEC

Travis Head took off his helmet and gloves, dropped to his knees and planted a kiss on the pitch after posting a century in a fourth consecutive Test on his home ground at the Adelaide Oval. It was trademark "Travball" on Day 3 of the third Ashes cricket Test.

By stumps Friday, Head was unbeaten on 142 and his unbroken partnership with fellow South Australian Carey (52) was 122. Australia was 271-4, with a lead of 356.

The freewheeling Australia batter had a huge reprieve on 99 when he slashed at a Jofra Archer delivery and was dropped by Harry Brook at gully. That was after he fended a Joe Root tweaker into the on-side and took off for a quick single, only to be sent back by batting partner Alex Carey.

He faced eight balls without scoring while on 99, then went for broke and advanced down the pitch and drove the ball back over Root's head to the long-on boundary to move to 103. It was his 11th century in 63 tests, and second in five innings since being promoted from No. 5 to open the innings in Perth. That's where his match-winning innings sealed Australia's eight-wicket win to open the series.

Brook took two excellent catches in the slips to remove Marnus Labuschagne (13) and Cameron Green (7) off Josh Tongue's bowling, but the one he missed against Head was costly.

The Australians went in to bat after dismissing England for 286 just before lunch, after Ben Stokes and Archer helped cut the first-innings margin to 85 with a record 106-run ninth-wicket stand. *—PTI*

Shubhankar tied at 71 at Mauritius Open

PORT LOUIS, 19 DEC

Indian golfer Shubhankar Sharma endured a mixed opening round, carding a two-over 74 to be tied 71st after dropping late bogeys at the AfrAsia Bank Mauritius Open here.

Sharma, who finished runner-up in the Q-School to regain status on the DP World Tour, seemed to be coping well with the tricky winds which were accompanied by rain at the highly challenging La Reserve Links, which is hosting the event for the second time.

Sharma was 1-under through 13 holes, when he literally hit a rough patch with a bogey followed by a double bogey to drop three shots in two holes. Overall Sharma had three birdies, three bogeys, all of which came on Par-5s, and a double bogey on the 16th, where he failed to come out of the rough with his first attempt.

The course kept asking questions and kept demanding skilful play, and the golfers for their part tried to provide answers as best as they could. Only 33 golfers played under par. *—PTI*

MESSI FIASCO FALLOUT

Ganguly sues football fan club official for Rs 50 crore

KOLKATA, 19 DEC

Sourav Ganguly has slapped a Rs 50 crore defamation suit notice on an official of a Kolkata-based football fan club for "falsely" dragging his name into the Lionel Messi fiasco and making defamatory public statements about the former India cricket captain.

Cricketer-turned-sports administrator Ganguly had also lodged a police complaint against Uttam Saha of 'Argentina Football Fan Club' on Thursday.

"Besides the police complaint, I have sent this official of the football fan club a Rs 50 crore legal notice. They keep saying anything that comes to their mind," Ganguly told PTI.

Saha, while speaking to a journalist, had accused Ganguly of being the actual man behind organising Messi's G.O.A.T India tour and alleged that it's now-arrested prime organiser Satadru Dutta was only a front.

In his complaint emailed to the Cyber Cell of the Kolkata Police, Ganguly said the person's statements have adversely affected his reputation and mental peace.

He was scheduled to remain on the platform to felicitate the Argentine football legend and his entourage alongside Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and other dignitaries on 13 December, but the programme was cancelled in the wake of widespread spectator rampage inside the Salt Lake stadium following Messi's premature exit from the venue. *—PTI*

Inglis' availability comes under scanner

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Australian batter Josh Inglis, who was to be available for only four IPL matches next year, could play more games after securing a hefty bid from Lucknow Super Giants in the recent players' auction. This has triggered uneasiness in the BCCI and his former franchise Punjab Kings.

Inglis was released by Punjab Kings before the auction due to his limited availability even though the team was keen to retain him. In its pre-auction communication to the 10 teams, the BCCI had stated that Inglis will be available for only four games in IPL 2026 because of his wedding on 18 April. The BCCI and the IPL Governing Council are monitoring this.

The Lucknow Super Giants and Sunrisers Hyderabad went on a bidding war for the 30-year-old before the former acquired him for Rs 8.6 crore, which was Rs 6 crore higher than his previous fee deal with Punjab.

The entire episode has ignited a discussion on whether Inglis took advantage of the situation. Inglis indicated that he got to know about his new IPL contract much after the auction had concluded. *—PTI*

PSG GOALKEEPER FRACTURES HAND AFTER PENALTY SHOOTOUT

PARIS, 19 DEC

Paris Saint-Germain goalkeeper Matvey Safonov has been left with a fractured hand following his penalty shootout heroics to win the Intercontinental Cup.

Safonov made four straight penalty saves as PSG beat Brazil's Flamengo 2-1 in the shootout on Wednesday to secure the club's first global title. He was thrown in the air by his teammates during the celebrations.

PSG said Friday that Safonov has a fracture in his left hand, without specifying how or when he was injured, and that "his situation will be re-evaluated" after three or four weeks.

Safonov, PSG's Russian backup goalkeeper, hadn't played a single minute for the team until summer signing Lucas Chevalier sustained an ankle injury which has ruled him out since his last game 29 November.

Chevalier was on the bench against Flamengo. PSG's next game is a French Cup meeting Saturday with fifth-tier Vendee Fontenay. —PTI

Lakshita, Sharvan win gold in air pistol mixed team

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Army pair of Lakshita Bishnoi and Sharvan Kumar produced a commanding performance as they overcome the challenge from Haryana's Suruchi Singh and Samrat Rana to clinch the 10m air pistol mixed team gold in the National Shooting Championships here on Saturday.

Laskhita and Sharvan defeated the India team regulars 16–10 to seal the title.

Lakshita (290) and Sharvan (292) aggregated 582 to qualify for the gold medal match along with the Haryana duo, who also came up with an identical score of 582 but with fewer 'inner 10s'.

Suruchi, who recently won the women's individual gold at the World Cup Final in Doha shot 293, while world champion Samrat Rana added 289.

Rajasthan qualified in third with 576 (Anjali Shekhawat's 288, Amit Sharma's 288), while Railways took the fourth spot with 576 (Sakshi Anil Suryavanshi 289, Saurabh Chaudhary's 287).

In the bronze-medal match, Rajasthan claimed the bronze after Anjali and Amit defeated Sakshi and Saurabh 17–13.

Karnataka's Jonathan Gavin Antony and Avanthika Madhu took the junior mixed team gold with a commanding 17–11 win over Haryana's Kapil Bainsla and Palak Gulia.

PHOTO: NRAI

The Karnataka pair controlled the match from the early stages to convert their qualification consistency into gold..

Madhya Pradesh secured the bronze medal with Aaradhya Mishra and Yugpratap Singh Rathore registered a dominant 16–2 victory over Uttarakhand's Abhinav Deshwal and Yashsavi Joshi.

Earlier in the junior qualification round, the Haryana duo topped the standings with a score of 580 (Palak 292, Kapil 288). Karnataka followed closely with 580 (Jonathan 292, Avanthika 288) to qualify for the gold-medal match.

Uttarakhand were placed third with 579 (Abhinav 290, Yashsavi 289), while Madhya Pradesh completed the top four with 574 (Yugpratap 288-9, Aaradhya 286). *—PTI*

CRISIS & A RELIEF

Checking doping; football league will happen: Govt

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

India's shambolic doping record is being addressed aggressively and a marginal decline in the overall positivity rate in the recently-released 2024 international testing figures is evidence that awareness campaigns are making a difference as the country bids to host the 2036 Olympics, a Sports Ministry source asserted on Friday.

As per the figures released by WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency), India conducted 7113 tests (6576 urine samples and 537 blood samples) last year. Of these, 260 returned adverse findings, accounting for a positivity rate of 3.6 per cent, the highest among all major countries which conducted 5,000 or more tests.

India thus topped the list for a third consecutive year, something that might hurt its chances when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) evaluates its bid to host the 2036 Olympic Games. Asked if the Ministry is concerned about the impact of this doping record on the Olympic bid, a top source pointed to the marginal decline compared to 2023.

ISL FOOTBALL

The Indian Super League clubs on Friday submitted a fresh proposal to the AIFF and the ministry, seeking perpetual operational and commercial rights for a club-owned league model while retaining the national federation as the sport's regulator.

"Proposals will keep coming but the league will happen. But in this entire fiasco, one must not ignore the fact that the Supreme Court has created an awkward situation by approving a constitution which may not be acceptable to FIFA as it allows the court to interfere," the source said. *—PTI*